

## What Gods find Useful

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## What Gods find Useful

by [Savnarae](#)

### Summary

The Clockwork City is no place for the faint of heart. A brass fortress of ruthless efficiency in a cruel wasteland devoid of resources and ruled by a neglectful god, it consumes the weak and disposes of the superfluous without remorse or mercy. Caliya Derynval chose long ago to cast off the yoke of religious orthodoxy and live outside those great bronze walls, but when a powerful Dunmer gentleman arrives with a clockwork problem and claims that Sotha Sil sent him to her for consultation, it sets in motion a chain of events that will shatter her solitude forever.

If she doesn't annoy him into killing her, first.

This fic reimagines and explores the Halls of Fabrication trial in ESO, where Divayth himself had gone off to seek help from Sotha Sil after his basement explodes with mechanized death.

### Notes

I haven't played these games in over two years, so bear with me if I fudge some details for the sake of the narrative. ESO's racial motifs books detail a failed courtship between Divayth Fyr and Doctor Alfidia Lupus in the Second Era, and by the Third Era events of Morrowind he's cloned himself four times and the results call themselves his wives. The mer is obviously rich, powerful, and very very lonely. Surely it must be difficult for someone so unique and opinionated to find an equal, even over the span of so many

thousands of years. But what good are the sights of Tamriel, Nirn, and realms beyond if they can't be shared and discussed with another?

Thankfully, he's close friends with Sotha Sil, Father of Mysteries and seer of all possible futures...

## An Influential Visitor

Lord Seht hosted powerful visitors in the Clockwork City. His own private venue, in a sense. A dinner party fit for a god. The denizens of the districts could sense their arrival anywhere under the golden gears of the sky. Such arcane might mingled easily with the great brass hum underfoot and the ever-present divinity of Sotha Sil himself. At times they moved slowly, the ripples of their aurbic shadows drawing Apostles like curious minnows in the wake of a boat. And at times they couldn't be bothered, teleporting as they pleased about the landscape, auras flashing like lightning through the souls of citizens.

It was a fact of life that had never much impacted the daily comings and goings of Caliya Derynval. Until the day one of those bolts felt the need to strike just outside her front door.

Three polite knocks echoed tinnily against the heavy bronze plate. Rumbles of thunder tremored through her heart. The Dunmer set down her spoon and crossed the kitchen with a curious frown as she re-tied her hair. Technically a Clockwork Apostle herself, she was a reclusive woman who lived far into the wastes, on the outskirts of the Radius in one of Lord Seht's many abandoned cliffside projects. The path to the rock-carved building was too difficult for the average lost adventurer to bother scaling, and other Apostles themselves had no reason to make the journey, either. Company was nearly unheard of.

The door wasn't locked, but it was in need of an oiling. The handle and hinges both creaked as they swung open to reveal a tall, slender, older Dunmer gentleman with silver hair swept back into a tight tail and a neatly-trimmed goatee ringing a slightly downturned mouth. The rest of him was encased in heavy-looking black and red plate armor, but despite his thin physique its weight didn't seem to trouble him in the slightest. Immense power radiated from every inch of his body, pressing almost physically against her chest, as though his soul itself was attempting to force entry into her home.

At the sight of her his brow creased visibly, as though he had expected someone else to answer the door. The possibility that he'd arrived at the wrong abandoned cliffside observatory seemed to cross his mind.

"Good day," the mer greeted, peering over her into the dark interior of the receiving hall before returning his sharp red eyes to hers. "Might you be Caliya Derynval?"

His accent was typical of a cultured exodromal, but his tone was flat, neutral. Underwhelming. Almost disinterested.

"I am," Caliya replied, looking him up and down. "Can I help you, muthsera...?"

She phrased it as an invitation to introduce himself, since he clearly already knew her. When the silence stretched, he finally showed a sign of life. An eyebrow quirked in derisive surprise. The edges of his plate rattled as he folded his arms.

"Oh, don't tell me Sil sent me to the one tin disciple who doesn't know the name 'Divayth Fyr'," he sighed. But he seemed to recant with a frown. "No, perhaps this could be advantageous..."

"Oh." Realization squeezed her throat. "Of course I know the name, Lord Fyr," she told him. Only a fool didn't. But despite her physical reaction, she wasn't really the deferential type. Even to grand master wizards like him. "However I don't believe we've met," she continued. "You'll forgive me for not hanging a portrait of every one of Lord Seht's personal guests above the mantle in case of emergency. You might have guessed that I don't host many visitors way out here."

He was here for a reason, after all. His sort didn't just drop by an old wasteland observatory for a social visit with the commonfolk. And the irreverent gamble paid off. A smirk twisted the corner of his pale lips. The mer glanced behind himself at the sweeping expanse of dust and brass that was her cliffside view of the world. "No? A shame. Hanging factotum-generated portraits of Sil and his associates seems exactly like the sort of thing you devoted lapdogs would do, after all. Right after you've finished lopping off bits of your body to turn yourselves into machines..."

As he opined about her colleagues, Caliya took a moment to gather herself. Divayth Fyr. On her doorstep. The mer's reputation was legendary. He was a reasonably frequent visitor to the City -- perhaps one of the most frequent, outside Vivec himself -- and everyone seemed to have an opinion of the famous wizard. Mostly negative, though they'd never admit it to his face. But then again, the feeling was mutual. He seemed to have a rather sour opinion about the Brass Fortress's population and lifestyle as well, with particular disdain for the religious devotion of Lord Seht's followers. And he was often vocal about it.

Or so the rumors went.

Frankly, Caliya couldn't blame him. She didn't much care for her so-called peers, either.

Which was why she lived out here, and not in there.

"How can I help you, Lord Fyr?" she asked.

His roving gaze snapped back to hers like a thrown dagger. "Perhaps you would like to invite me inside?"

Inside? She cast a glance back through the front room into the kitchen beyond, and her dinner. Right now?

"...Don't get me wrong," he continued flatly over her shoulder. "I enjoy a good dusty, breezy clifftop shout as much as the next fellow..." She felt him lean closer, his aurbic pressure increasing significantly. He was trying to peer in as well, to see what she was looking at. "I assure you, whatever blasphemous experiments you may or may not be conducting out here are beyond my interest."

That wasn't the problem.

She backed away and opened the door wider, permitting him entry. "You said Lord Seht sent you to me?"

"Yes," Divayth replied, stepping through and looking around. It was an airy but unremarkable space, functional brass-and-glass fixtures and austere walls lined with bare pipes, in the style of most of the city's interior decoration. "You see, I have a problem rather connected to his charming little clockwork realm, and he suggested that I visit you to solve it."

Caliya closed the creaking door behind him and drew a breath. "Well, you've arrived at a poor time," she admitted. "I'm in the middle of dinner. What is the nature of your problem?"

Divayth scoffed, half-interrupting her last few words. "Oh, far be it from me to interrupt dinner, Ms. Derynval, please. You're only holding up one of the greatest mages to walk the face of Nirn."

Unfortunately for one of the greatest mages to walk the face of Nirn, she wasn't kidding. "If Lord Seht sent you to me, it must have been for my research into the wild fabricants," she replied, undaunted. "Can I offer you a book to read while you wait? One of my unpublished research journals? I would assume a wizard of your caliber would have read the published ones before seeking external assistance."

The revelation sank in slowly. His eyes didn't leave hers. "...You're quite serious, aren't you?"

If he thought she was going to drop everything and tend to his needs without warning and waste a perfectly good meal, either Divayth Fyr was about to experience a rude awakening, or Lord Seht had knowingly sent a harbinger of death to one of his favored students' front doors.

"With respect, Lord Fyr," she began, "preparing the meat of a fabricant for elven consumption requires six to twelve hours to cleanse the oil and destring hundreds of filaments of brass veins from an entire beast. It takes ten minutes to eat, but only fifteen to decompose into an inedible slurry of foul jelly when left to its own devices." She started toward the library, hoping he would follow. He did. "I'm not certain why Lord Seht sent you here now, but I cannot afford to waste it."

"Everything you people eat is an inedible slurry of foul jelly," Divayth quipped thoughtlessly. "I fail to see the difference. I thought those beasts weren't fit for consumption, isn't that why all of your food is a colorless mush squeezed out of a tap?"

"Yes," Caliya replied, pausing before her mess of a personal bookshelf and wishing she'd gotten around to organizing it last week like she'd planned to. Chalk slate, engraving plates and paper notebooks from Nirn Above lay scattered about shelves that stretched floor to ceiling.

"However, they failed to lay a mush-tap pipe this far out into the wasteland, and the other Apostles

enjoy attempting to force me back into their fold by restricting the amounts I'm allowed to carry when I have to come back for more. Thus, I supplant my nutrition with local game creatures to defy their wishes."

"Hmm." He stepped up beside her, one elbow perched on his wrist, fingers stroking his beard as he studied the academic chaos. "A rebel. Finally, something I might like about you." He flicked his fingertips toward the kitchen. "Go on, then. Eat your slop before it degenerates. We'll discuss how I hope to enlist your aid when you've finished."

"You're too kind, my lord," Caliya replied as she turned her back, unable to keep the sarcasm from coloring her tone. "Please treat the paperwork gently, and I apologize for the lack of organization."

She paused by the threshold when he didn't respond, and glanced back. The indignation in his fiery stare skipped a nervous beat in her heart, but there was still a faint smirk on his face. She didn't want to be afraid of him, but common sense and basic self-preservation begged her to be a little more cautious than that. All these grand masters could be a temperamental bunch, after all.

"I hope you know when to rein in that sharp tongue," he warned with an edge of amusement. "It might cut someone some day..."

She didn't trust herself not to add fuel to the flames. Instead, she offered a curt nod and headed back to her kitchen table.

The "meat" was already beginning to separate and dissolve into the clockwork gruel around it. Caliya pushed the soupy melt around the brass bowl with her spoon, hoping to find some of the still-solid chunks and force them down quickly. Seht had really picked a terrible time to send her such prestigious company, but what bothered her more was that he knew. He knew the consequences of his decisions before he made his choices. He knew she was eating, and he knew that sending Divayth Fyr here would force an early confrontation between them. But why? What did that gain for this situation? The Father of Mysteries could have easily entertained any company for another ten minutes and avoided all of this. And what could Fyr possibly want from her? She was a field researcher who specialized in deconstructing the anatomy of fabricants. What did someone of his caliber need from her, that Seht himself or any other Apostle couldn't provide?

She studied her meal as she ate, as though the answers could be divined from some particular arrangement of its deterioration. Perhaps dinner was just meant to slow down the encounter. To give her a platform to push back against his insistence. A point of assertion, to inform him that she wasn't the sort who could be kicked around so easily, as someone like Divayth Fyr might be used to.

Or, perhaps she'd never know.

The wizard's power pressed down on her as he approached the kitchen and frowned, field journal in hand. "Is that stench coming from your meal?"

Yes, it was.

"Open a window if you need to."

She wasn't proud of having to eat things like this, and Caliya tended to turn her shame into a shield.

"You realize that's rot, yes?" Divayth needed.

She held out a spoonful. "You sure?" she asked. "Care to try some, to be really sure?"

"Ulgh." His lip curled. Despite being across the room, the dunmer still physically recoiled. "What a miserable life."

"Thanks, I'll note your opinions in my forthcoming biography." A spot of white dripped to the table with a soft plat. She shoved the rest into her mouth before more was lost. It tasted as awful as it smelled, but she pushed it down anyway.

"...I thought this place couldn't get more barbaric," Divayth muttered. But instead of returning to the library, he flipped through her notebook where he stood. "I will never understand why you grovelling so-called scholars tolerate this mistreatment and neglect. Whatever Sil's teaching you isn't worth this abuse, you know. Not an ounce of dignity among the lot of you."

"I'd rather die on my own terms than suffocate to death in the mindless bureaucracy of

organized religion.” Another spoonful, down the hatch. Slimy. It sat thick in her stomach, threatening discontent with its new surroundings.

He nodded into the book. “So you’ve chosen to poison yourself. Creative. I suppose I might do the same, given the alternatives.”

He left her alone for a few more sludgy, jellylike mouthfuls before raising his eyes.

“I noticed you’ve failed to defend your saintly patron from slander. Most of your type tend to stare in disdainful horror when I raise the spectre of Sil’s cruelty. He spoke highly of you in recommending your services to me. Do you not feel the same about him?”

Caliya stared down at the liquefying remnants of her dinner in quiet impatience. Couldn’t he just leave her alone for five more minutes? She was almost done. Although the churning in her stomach suggested that maybe she wasn’t.

“Does my opinion of Lord Seht factor into your problem?” she replied, looking up. “He’s a god; he’s busy. He has better things to do than hand food to the needy. The Clockwork City isn’t a forgiving world. It’s no secret that it wasn’t meant to support mortal life. It’s a harsh wasteland of scarcity where the weak die and the clever amass what little luxury this place has, to the detriment of all others. I have no opinion of it. It just is.”

Divayth abandoned all pretenses of browsing her journal. “What drew you here, then?” he asked. “If you’ve no interest in licking Sil’s bootheels?”

Caliya stared him down for a long second, wondering what that could possibly matter, and why such a grand master of the arcane would care. She finished her meal and rose, then immediately regretted the decision. She’d waited too long. This “food” was going to be a struggle to keep down.

“Wasn’t my choice, if you really need to know. My mother came here when I was a child,” she informed him, trying to control her quickening breath. A clammy chill swept her skin. She turned away with the bowl and spoon to hide the healing magic she attempted to massage into her guts. “And she died soon after. I never knew how she got here, or why. But I refused to live in the gutter with the rest of the Slag Town outcasts.”

She carried the bronzewear to the sink and submerged it in a thin, oily pool of water sitting in the bottom of the basin. A film clung to her fingertips as they dipped below the surface. The stink did little to soothe her restless stomach. She’d wash it later, after he was gone.

“Seht called you an Apostle,” Divayth challenged.

Caliya turned to face him, spreading an arm to brandish her stained but still recognizable robes. “And I still am, technically. I studied their teachings and was initiated into the order.”

“...As an orphan.” He seemed to want to come closer, but another sniff of the air kept him where he stood.

She started across the room. A cramping pain seized her abdomen. She staggered toward the table and caught herself, panting as it passed.

“If I’ve been sent here to witness your death, I’m not reporting it to Sil,” the master wizard sneered. “And if you’re about to return that foul waste back to the earth, I’ll have nothing to do with that either.”

“Why don’t you just go back to the fetching library like I asked,” Caliya snapped down at the table’s edge, “and I’ll be with you in a minute. I need to lie down.”

And yet, despite her anger and dismissal, he followed her to her bedroom, and leaned against the doorframe while she clambered onto the stiff slab that served as her mattress. For a long moment, she stared at the ceiling and breathed. Shockingly, Divayth respected the silence, taking the moment to properly browse whatever book he’d been carrying around this entire time.

“...When you’re up to the task of talking,” he began softly after a few minutes, “I am curious to know where these notebooks came from.”

“The writing?” she exhaled, “or the books themselves?”

“The books,” he clarified. “The materials to craft an object such as this are not available in this realm.”

“Gifts,” Caliya replied, feeling significantly better already. “Lord Seht stops by from time to time with more, and to collect completed works for review and publication.”

“Sil gifts you paper notebooks from Nirn?” Divayth asked.

“Yes.” The woman turned her head to see him better. “It’s how I know he approves.”

“Of your work?”

“Yes.”

He flipped studiously through a few more pages until he came upon something that drew his brow into another frown. The wizard peered closely at it, looked at something outside the room, and closed the book.

“Come back to the library when you’re feeling stable,” he informed her.

“Whatever you wish, muthsera,” Caliya sighed at the ceiling as he left.

His gait flinched, but he seemed to think better of further confrontation, and vanished from sight. She wasn’t sure if that exhale was a sigh or a laugh.

# Purpose, Revealed

## Chapter Summary

With dinner tamed, Caliya joins Divayth in the library, where he reveals the true intent for his unexpected visit.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

One might expect that being in the presence of a mage like Divayth Fyr would be like swimming through an oil current, but Caliya adapted well to his auric pressure. It wasn't so much thicker than Lord Seht's as just made of a different material, somehow. Daedric, if rumor was to be believed.

The wizard had cleared one of her study desks of her own possessions and replaced them with nearly half of the contents of the shelves. Really made himself at home in the brief minutes he'd been left unsupervised. His back was to her, attention shifting between three open books floating eye level before him. Surprisingly, most of the tomes stacked and splayed around the table *had* been published before, from what she could see. Works she hadn't expected him to be interested in, or at least to have read before, if he was researching this problem on his own. Perhaps she overestimated her own importance as an author, though. It made sense. The only conduits to Nirn Above were Lord Seht himself or his many guests. What use would any of them have for her niche area of expertise?

Until now, at least.

"Have you concluded your business?" Divayth asked without facing her.

"Y'know, now that you ask, I have some yard work I was planning to spend the evening on," Caliya replied, crossing the room for a better look at what he was studying. "Those rocks out front could use some rearranging, and I need to sweep up all that dust..."

She stopped beside him. It was sort of a warm darkness that he radiated, she decided. So very unlike Lord Seht's refreshing light.

"...Shouldn't take more than a few hours."

The brief recess seemed to have lightened his temperament. The wizard's smirk was more natural and less biting. A wave of his hand spread the notebooks between them. All three were open to exploded anatomical diagrams of local fabricants -- a nix-hound, a kagouti, and a verminous. Their fleshy base bodies remained intact, but the artificial components and the skeletal sockets they attached to spanned the pages. Small dotted lines connected all the pieces together.

"These illustrations are yours?" he asked.

"Yes."

Hundreds of hours of study had been poured into every one of those works. Perhaps thousands. Harvesting specimens for meticulous deconstruction, cataloguing each part, putting them all back together again to check her work, over and over and over...

A stack of folded bookplates and Nirn-published books scooted closer. "You authored these as well?"

Caliya scanned the titles on a few spines. "Yes. I offered you unpublished works before. I realized, while I was lying prone and suffering in abject misery just now, that perhaps my extensive collection of knowledge might be a bit esoteric for anyone not of this world. That maybe you *hadn't* read anything of mine."

"Hmph." Divayth continued to smirk. "You underestimate the level of esoteric knowledge that



some in Nirn desire,” he replied, finally turning to face her. All three books closed and gently laid themselves on the table. “Including myself. Feel free to bolster your ego with the knowledge that I have, in fact, read a few of your works and appreciated their straightforward candor and wryly entertaining style.” He laid his fingers atop another stack. “However, I had little idea how vast your published catalogue truly was.”

Despite his urging, Caliya didn’t take well to compliments. “...Well, if there’s anything that catches your eye, you’re welcome to keep it. I have plenty of copies lying around.”

*That* aroused his interest. She could practically sense the pleased excitement that thrilled through him. “Is that so?” he asked, a bit too quickly for her tastes. His curiosity narrowed into suspicion. “I wonder if you don’t understand the value of your words, Ms. Derynval. Perhaps I can offer you an exchange.” He cast a sweeping gesture at the rest of her shelves, the ones more neatly stacked with writing that was not her own, tucking his other arm academically behind his back. “You claim to have no love for the rest of your Apostolate, and yet I see an adherence to Clockwork dogma in the lack of diversity contained in the rest of your collection. I would be happy to provide to you a number of curious titles -- only some of which I’ve written -- that mirror your level of exacting detail and dogged pursuit of truth in other aspects of the world. I am certain you would find them enjoyable reads. And, perhaps...” He looked her up and down with a pinning attention. “...Enlightening.”

Curious titles? He was right -- there were plenty of blasphemous books missing from her collection, and his implications were fairly clear. Unfortunately, she wasn’t exactly in any position to accept his terms. And besides, this wasn’t a social visit.

“Any books you want are free. I get by on word-of-mouth just fine, thanks. I don’t need a trade. You came here with some problem you had, right?” she asked, steering the conversation out of dangerous waters.

Divayth didn’t let her change the topic without a sharply scrutinous frown and a long silence.

“Yes,” he finally admitted, clearly disappointed. “These creatures you specialize in. Mechanical beasts that roam freely through the wilds outside of the fortress. They have been filling my undercroft for an unknown reason. I have sent enough foolhardy adventurers to their deaths attempting to cleave a path through them to the source that I have finally admitted defeat and sought assistance from their creator. And, as I’ve stated, he sent me instead to you.”

Caliya frowned.

“I’m sorry, *where* are they?” she asked, wracking her brains for any mention of property the master wizard might own or call a residence in the Clockwork City. “I’m not familiar with your undercroft, I’m afraid.”

Divayth didn’t flinch. “No, you wouldn’t be. Tel Fyr was not constructed until after you came here, if you were a young child at the time. My tower is on Morrowind’s island of Vvardenfell. A gift from the Telvanni, for joining their--” He cut himself off, waving his hand and shaking his head. “Nevermind. I seek advantages in combat with the creatures en masse. And even a brief perusal of your body of work is enough to tell me that you will be more than capable as a companion in this endeavor.”

She was still processing that first bit. “Your tower *in Morrowind* is filled with fabricants?” she clarified.

Divayth folded his arms impatiently. “Only the undercroft, Ms. Derynval, please keep up,” he insisted. “I’ve tolerated your deliberate antics long enough, I won’t also tolerate your mental sloth.”

Caliya scowled sharply. “Well, beg pardon Lord Fyr, I wasn’t aware that fabricants could escape the confines of the Clockwork Cit--”

“Neither was I,” Divayth interrupted, dropping his gaze to her books and tracing the edge of one text with the tips of his gloved fingers, “until they began swarming the chambers beneath the tower. Do you understand the nature and peculiarity of the situation yet, or would you like me to try smaller words?”

She couldn’t help a smirk, but before she could offer a witty comeback he scowled.

“Don’t,” he warned, raising his scowl to her. “You’ve stretched my patience thin enough. And

I've granted you far more of it than you've yet to prove worthy of."

At that, she conceded. He was right. He was being remarkably congenial for all of her smartass retorts.

"Alright, alright. You're looking for useful ways to clear a large amount of them at once," she replied. "I can help with that. And...thank you, for being so patient." She wasn't a particularly popular woman, and she didn't expect him to like her much, either. But his tolerance was admirable. "I can give you the quick-n-dirty, or I have a few specimens downstairs we can look at in detail to understand exactly how they work and how to take them down."

Divayth's impatience dissipated. "Live specimens?" he asked.

Caliya flashed a grin. "As 'live' as machines get."

The wizard dropped his attention to the floor, then nodded at her. "Very well. Let's see your collection, then."

## Chapter End Notes

The first of many mysteries presents itself. Yes, I'm stealing the Halls of Fabrication plot from ESO, it's a delightful framework in which to set a realm-spanning story. ;)

# The First Lesson

## Chapter Summary

Caliya leads Divayth down to the specimen chambers to begin their lesson on the complexities of Lord Seht's fabricants and the intricacies of destroying them.

The fabricants were housed in one of the building's many derelict chambers. What Lord Seht had once used all this space for, Caliya had no idea. He'd left her more rooms than anyone could possibly utilize, and she was utilizing plenty through the course of her studies.

This particular hall was a lofty rectangle with an arched ceiling and several rows of glass lamps hung from thick chains across brass beams. Most of them still worked. Though, as she hefted the lever by the base of the stairs to activate them, she counted one more that seemed to have burnt out since the last time she'd been down here.

Eventually, they'd have to be fixed.

But obviously not today.

Lining the walls were a series of enormous tubelike capsules of increasing widths built into the very architecture. She led Divayth Fyr to the thicker cylinders by the far end, where she had marked a number of them with the names of their contents. Again, the previous purposes for these structures was wholly unknown to the woman, but they served as durable specimen containment units when retrofitted with the correct restraints.

"We'll start with the kagouti," she decided, entirely because it was the closest. She sank a thick button beside the capsule deep into the wall around it. The tube made a full half-revolution, revealing its contents. Inside "slept" a kagouti fabricant, suspended at eye level by a series of sturdy brass rods and pipes she had fused to its spine. Two thick clamps surrounded the mechanics of its brass ankles, leaving its mouth the only potential danger to avoid.

"I thought you said it was live?" Divayth asked, frowning.

"It is," Caliya replied, balancing one boot on the raised lip of the tube to lean closer and feel around behind its skull plate with both hands. "They are capable of entering stasis for an indeterminate length of time, and can be reactivated with minimal consequence." She found the catches and hooked her nails beneath them, pausing to glance back at her company. "I can assume you're not a particularly squeamish man, yes?"

His flat glare would have felled a Cliff Racer.

"Alright, but I'll warn you, it's a bit uncomfortable to look under the hood," she added, popping the levers. She hadn't moved herself out here for no reason, after all.

With a pneumatic hiss, the pressure seals broke. She unlatched a few more clamps hidden deep around the beast's neck and jaw and pried off its skull plate slowly and carefully. Telekinetic power surrounded the metal to offset its sheer weight. Cold blood and oil slithered across her fingers and dripped down its chin and open teeth, spattering through the grated floor below. The great bronze crest peeled away from the beast's head with an unsettling series of wet pops and a few juicy crunches. Caliya leaned it against the inner wall of the cylinder and stepped back, motioning Divayth closer. Crimson and black painted her dark skin and shined in the dusky glow of the lamps.

Inside was a messy tangle of self-sealing tubes, raw meat, and wet bone. The plate had contained the machine's upper palate and protective casing for much of its head, and removing it exposed the meaty rim of its upper jaw and the backs of its eyeballs as well as the hemispherical brass lids that closed them. These and more were connected via delicate spindles to a small,

smudged glass globe about the size of a fist suspended in a brass creche in the center of it all. The globe was filled with golden oil, magnifying an intricate series of interlocking cogs, gears, and rods nestled tightly within.

"Lord Seht's fabricants model Nirn Above in form, function, and practicality," she lectured, shifting away from Divayth's immense aurbic pressure as he leaned in for a better look. "External and internal structures. Just as the Nirn kagouti's massive crest protects its brain and other sensory organs, so too does the plate of a fabricant variety protect its delicate cognition gears."

She picked up a coil of wire hanging from the inner wall of the chamber and threaded a few tight loops through the ring of the beast's upper gums and teeth, then spiraled the ends through the grate below. This would prevent the machine from lifting its head and snapping at them, when reactivated.

"The simple answer is lightning," she continued, pushing herself up off her knees. "But the more complex answer is a *specific direction* of lightning. Metal conducts electricity, of course, but the beasts are designed to deliver power away from delicate organ structures when overloaded or assaulted." She tapped the creche with a nail, leaving a beady crescent of mixed fluid behind, and looked up at Divayth. The wizard was stroking his goatee again, eyes taking in every detail of the complexity before him with a scholar's fascination. "However, if you know where to strike," she added, "and with the power and control someone like you commands, overriding these defensive measures ought to be trivial."

She stepped closer to the beast and slipped her fingers through the creche's fine scaffolding, laying their tips against the globe like a seer with a crystal ball. "You might have surmised that this particular organ is Lord Seht's mechanical analogue to a kagouti brain. The correct application of magic can freeze their clockwork in place, effectively stopping time for the entire beast. In the wild, they do not age, and nor do they grow. Once they are released from their fabrication chambers -- born, if you will -- they remain as they are until wear and tear or overwhelming violence ends them. Thus, they can likewise be restarted in their functions once properly shut down..."

It was a process Caliya had completed thousands of times. The spell was a complex one, but practice rendered it rote. Weaving a touch of Lord Seht's own ambient divinity into a braid of temporal kineticism, she pressed her power through the resistive glass and into the oil around the gears and cogs. Scintillant orange light flowed from her fingertips and perfused through the liquid, muddled by the medium but eventually finding its way to its brass targets.

The gears illuminated, and all at once began to spin and tick. Rods shifted and realigned with irregular cadence, engaging and disengaging various cogs as the beast wound back up to speed. Its exposed eyelids rolled back with a sharp tink of metal on metal. A deep red glow pulsed from its orbital sensors. Thin foam pressed through the edges of the self-sealing tubes around its skull with a frothy hiss as they detected and expelled the air Caliya had introduced by detaching the plate. Bubbles of blood and oil slid with a soaplike sheen down the brass. The fluids began to pump and circulate once more.

The beast awoke, and did so rather violently. The grate rattled as it tossed its head about and fought for freedom, but the thick wire bit into its flesh and held steady.

"I've disabled the voxbox so it won't start bellowing at us," she explained, stepping back and rubbing her hands on her robe. The metal mesh fabric did little to clean her skin. "Used to give myself headaches before I figured out how. They're particularly loud when your ears are halfway down their wrenched-open throat, as you might have guessed."

"This beast can live indefinitely in this state?" Divayth asked, stepping closer as she backed away. The golden glow of the cognition orb reflected in his eager stare.

"In which state?" Caliya asked. "Induced temporal stasis, or welded to the containment chamber?"

"Without its fore crest," he clarified, tracing the upper edge of the metal around its temple where brass flowed almost seamlessly into bone. His glove paused centimeters from a roiling, pulsing mass of contracting muscle that connected its lower jaw to the rest of the skull. Veins and

oil thrummed through the fibrous tissue beneath translucent skin to the rhythms of its clockwork heart. He wasn't squeamish in the slightest.

"Oh. Yes. But not in the wild," Caliya explained, tapping a few semicircular tubes near its cheek. "I added these to compensate. The brass fixings hardwired to its bone structure connect to flutes in the fore plate that provide sensory feedback. Without their front plate they'd piss blood and oil everywhere until they ran out of fluids to pump and shut down. Kinda like you or I would if half our skull was lopped off," she added with a smirk, but his eyes were on her hands, not her face. She continued with the explanation. "This rubbery piece shorts that connection, allowing me to pull them apart and study their inner workings while they're still running. They're enchanted to extend and self-seal when any part of the machine is removed, but obviously there's a slight delay in engagement..." She wiggled her wetly stained fingers for emphasis.

Divayth nodded along. "You've modified Sil's creations to suit your curiosity. How irreverent."

He really liked to pick at hypocrisy, didn't he?

"How else are we supposed to study this world?" Caliya challenged. "Wouldn't be much of a Father of Mysteries if he just handed out the answers himself."

The master wizard smirked and chuckled quietly. "You could follow the examples of your peers and write blithering treatises on the nature of knowledge itself. Winding screeds lamenting unobservable phenomena theorized only by indirect philosophy. Contribute nothing of substance to the world while wasting a tremendous amount of your own time and thinning the patience of others in the process."

She shrugged, understanding exactly which of her peers' publications he was talking about. "Or I could wrestle a verminous fabricant out by the Elegiac Replication and drag it up six stories of sheer rock wall to pry it open with a wrench and take notes on what I found inside. I know which one I find more entertaining."

Divayth flashed surprisingly straight, white teeth at her in a smile she found more than a little predatory. "You are a Slag Town orphan at heart. Bully for you, Ms. Derynval. I admit, when Sil promised me an Apostle to consult, my hopes fell rather sharply. Your self-appointed order is filled to the brim with lockstep hive minds mocking the very concept of individual thought, and the handful of you who diverge from the cultural monolith tend toward a specifically irritating sort of lunacy that renders you unsuitable for interaction."

Caliya quirked an eyebrow. He was beginning to sound like a less patient Lord Seht. And she could feel herself wanting to test his resolve again. "Specific sort of lunacy? You mean to tell me I haven't revealed my general sort of irritating lunacy already?" She tsked quietly. "I've disappointed myself, Lord Fyr, perhaps I should try harder," she threatened, leaning against the cylinder's case. "Wouldn't want to give anyone the impression I'm pleasant company. I'll start getting more visitors."

She'd gotten about six words out when he'd started a deep inhale, and was about halfway through her spiel when he finished with a lengthy, eye-closing sigh. He pinched the bridge of his nose testily.

"It's just occurred to me. Do you know whose company you might find most agreeable?" he asked suddenly.

"Whose?" she asked.

*"Sheogorath."*

From the pointed anger in his voice it was obviously meant as an insult, but she had no idea who that was.

"Friend of yours?" she teased.

"No," he replied coldly, turning back to the struggling kagouti. "Have you anymore useful information about this thing? You'd started to say something about lightning."

"So I did," she agreed, pulling herself back on track before she really pissed him off. "And I said before that you might think electricity useful to attack metal foes with. However they tend to ground themselves very well, and route lightning away from sensitive weak points that might be vulnerable to that kind of power. For instance, if you'll watch..."

Sparks snapped between her fingers as she called up a simple lightning spell. White-purple arcs skittered across to the kagouti's lower jaw and disappeared into its neck. Runic channels smelted into the brass of its right leg illuminated and clashed against the stiff manacle holding it in place.

"This happens when you attempt to strike it on the fore plate," she told him. "The hinge of its jaw is in direct contact with the plate at all times, and the machine is capable of rerouting externally-applied electricity through its pipes, wires, and struts harmlessly into the ground. However, if you know where to direct your power, you can bypass this safety mechanism and destroy its brain."

She cut the spell and braced one hand on the beast's gums. They were warm and unpleasantly moist, and its struggles against the wire were beginning to cut into the stiff tissue. "The eyes are a difficult target to hit, but if you can strike one and force a current through to the other, you're guaranteed to shatter the globe and slag its cognition gears." As she spoke she pointed, tracing the route from one eyeball through the struts that connected it to the creche, back out to the other eyeball. "If you do it right you'll literally feel the resistor enchantments fail and the beast will stutter to a mechanical halt."

"Hmmm..."

Divayth lifted his fingers. A bright blue channel of electricity webbed his glove, arcs of it lifting from his skin and breaking off into bursts of snapping light. Its luminance underlit his face with a stark authority and threw sharp shadows of the writhing kagouti onto the back of the specimen cylinder. Caliya could feel the heat of it warming her skin. His power circulated around the hall. His aurbic essence skimmed her soul.

The wizard pressed forward, casting the spell. A spine-tingling arc of power leapt from his hand to the creature's eye. Quick and accurate. The fabricant thrashed and dropped its lower jaw as though howling with rage but no sound escaped its throat. Its entire body flushed and crackled with purple light. The wizard frowned at the response, but tamed its resistance with a slight nod.

The purple withdrew, receding from the beast's legs, its tail, its torso. The deeper timber of sparks rose to a snapping high note and Divayth's power traveled like a lit fuse down the ocular spindle and across its struts toward the gleaming brass creche. More runes and symbols like Dwemer language flashed through the caging metal, pushing back against the wizard's invasive spell with a shower of red and orange. Divayth gave a final, single laugh and a flick of his fingertips.

With a tinkling pop, the globe and its protective cradle exploded. Caliya had barely enough time to protect her eyes as it showered her with glass, brass, and warm oil. Through the blinding flash she saw more of the same spatter against a white ward just inches from the wizard's smirking countenance and tumble, slide, and dribble ineffectually to the grate below.

The kagouti fabricant gave one final hideous spasm, then sagged from its restraints, slack-jawed and very dead. Half of the creche hung limply from a few joints against the inside of the beast's skull. Thin smoke rose from the seared tips of its many spindles. Dozens of beautiful, fine-toothed gears had melted into a single globule of glowing brass clinging thickly to its webbing, slowly subsuming a few shards of curved glass that had been caught between the two.

Divayth stroked his goatee and harrumphed at the aftermath, apparently quite satisfied with his performance.

"Thanks," Caliya chirped into the silence, lowering her arm and watching various fluids drip from the fabricant's teeth and tusks. "I definitely meant that as a direct invitation to destroy one of my most complete specimens with impunity, and not as an academic suggestion to do so on your own time."

The master wizard smirked wryly. "I'm not quite certain I've fully mastered the technique. Keep up that attitude and I might feel inclined to practice on the rest of your collection." He turned his newfound mirth on her. "And, if you still haven't learned your lesson by then, you."

The scholar sighed and smeared the brain oil dripping down her hand onto her other sleeve. She still wasn't going to be intimidated by him, even now that he'd moved onto direct threats. Lord Seht knew her personality. He wouldn't have sent Divayth Fyr here alone if the wizard couldn't

tolerate her cheek.

...Right?

“Well, you’ll have a bit more trouble with the nix hounds,” she said, turning away to glance at the other still-closed specimen chambers. “They don’t have exploitable cognition modules.”

## The Trick with Nix Hounds

Nix hound fabricants were fairly stupid creatures. But they were also simplistic in design, so they didn't really need much in the way of clockwork intelligence. Caliya explained this to Divayth as she peeled the skullplate from the bug. It doused her hands in another biochemical treatment before the veins and pipes within had a chance to self-seal.

"If you look inside, you can see anatomical similarities," she explained, hefting the metal and leaning it against the inner chamber wall. "But unlike kagouti, destroying the 'brains' of a nix hound won't stop it so quickly."

This one was mounted vertically, displaying its legs to the cylinder's entrance. It was also more visibly damaged than the kagouti had been, its proboscis bent and one foreleg severed cleanly near its lower joint. Dents, nicks, and scratches scarred its carapace. She'd learned her lesson. Don't give a destructive child like Divayth Fyr the nice toys to play with. But the parts of it she needed to demonstrate to him were intact, at least. And there was enough room in the specimen container for both dunmer to stand on opposite sides of the machine, so she didn't need to suffocate a hand's width away from the enveloping curl of his power.

Caliya touched the backs of the insect's bulbous, exposed ocular clusters and drew a path along the struts and joints deeper into its head.

"Trace the eyes up to the sensory processor, and you'll see it's significantly smaller." If the kagouti's globe was nord-fist-sized, the nix-hound's was about the length and thickness of an orc's thumb. It lacked both a protective creche and inner fluid. "In fact, if you try to assassinate a group of them this way, you'll make your life significantly harder."

She eyed him a moment, wondering if she should tell him why or just let him work it out for himself. The latter would certainly be a more memorable experience.

He met her gaze with impatient curiosity.

"Go on," he half-insisted.

"...How serious were you about practicing your technique?" she asked, reaching in to awaken the machine. A thread of divinity, braided into temporal kineticism. Thank you, Lord Seht.

She wasn't quite sure why, but the question satisfied the wizard. "Ah, so your life *does* hold value to you, good. Keep your disrespect in check and I'll return the favor," Divayth replied.

He watched cogs and gears wind up to speed. She didn't have to fasten this fabricant to the grate like she did with the kagouti. All four of its legs were already clamped in place, and its neck didn't have the rotational capacity to turn enough to threaten either of them.

Caliya wasn't about to let that bit of temerity go unchallenged, however. She leaned around the back of the chamber and hefted a heavy, wall-mounted lever upward with an echoing clunk, unlocking one of the two clamps fastening its back legs in place.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind, Your High Graciousness, but that actually wasn't what I was asking," she clarified. "In fact, I *want* you to do to this fabricant what you did to the last one."

Divayth ignored the title and quirked an eyebrow. "Is that so." He looked the struggling beast up and down. He seemed about to protest or ask another question, but smirked and unfolded his arms with a shrug. "Well, far be it from me to refuse an invitation to destroy more of your meticulous work." Hot sparks snapped around his fingertips. "I'm certain it will be just as satisfying a second time."

"Just a moment!" Caliya intercepted before he could reach out. "I'd like to bring your attention to two important things before you unleash all that pent-up aggression. First, notice how I released only one of its legs and it still behaves as though it's still trapped?"

She tapped the nix hound's unlocked hind leg nearer to her. Divayth's power dissipated as he stepped around the machine's undercarriage for a better look.

"They're gear-locked together," she explained, gripping the limb near its body and pulling. Despite no visible restraint, it seemed to hit some sort of internal brace, dragging the back chassis.



The rest of its joints flinched and struggled but they too remained coiled, a perfect mirror of its other leg still clamped in place. “Nix hound fabricant hind legs have very limited individual mobility. It simplifies the mechanics required for their movement. Just keep that in mind for what happens next,” she told him, motioning them around the back and away from danger. “I’m going to unclamp its other leg, and you’ll want to stand away from them. I’m sure that fancy armor is more than just decorative, but just the same it looks so pristine, I’d hate to scuff it.”

He was getting better at ignoring her little jabs. Discouraging such behavior, she had to assume. A shame that she wasn’t so easily discouraged.

With a heavy clang, she threw up the second lever and freed the fabricant’s other hind leg. A frenzy of movement followed as the limbs pumped ineffectually into the air. The machine scrabbled for purchase with frantic dedication, but the rest of the specimen chamber’s restraints held strong.

“It’ll do that until it wears out its gears,” Caliya explained, nodding at the repetitive strikes. “And you’d think that destroying its brain would stop it, right?”

She waited for an answer.

In a show of patient impatience, Divayth didn’t give one.

“Go on then,” she continued, undeterred. “Take out its sensory module. Be precise. And note the difference between what happens with a nix hound, and what happens with...”

She didn’t need to finish. Aurbic pressure whipped through the specimen cylinder, spiralling around Divayth’s forearm and down into his fingertips. She’d never admit it, but Caliya was profoundly impressed with such effortless magic. Even just watching him raise his hand and send fizzling lightning down the nix hound’s ocular strut, she gained a deeper understanding of what it meant to truly command the world. To tame the wild arcana, and turn it to hard labor.

She used to think that was just a trick Lord Seht could do. But apparently such mastery was not confined to the ability of a god in his own realm after all.

The gear case shattered, sending shards of glass every which way and melting the brass within. However instead of stuttering to a halt as the kagouti had, a series of clicks and spinning whines sounded from the machine. Low at first, but quickly rising in pitch and frequency. The nix hound continued to struggle, its long hind legs springing again and again against the air, but their movements became *more* frenetic, even as its organic forelimbs seemed to die.

Divayth shifted a half-step away, distaste etched into his expression.

Caliya brushed glass shards off her sleeve and gestured at the mechanical chaos unfolding between them. “So you can imagine,” she began, raising her voice over the cacophony, “what would happen if you had a whole cave full of these things and you’re, oh, I don’t know...A young, enterprising clockwork field scholar who thinks she’s so very clever and careful with her magic and is so very ready to harvest ten near-complete specimens for research.”

A wide, knowing smile stretched the wizard’s goatee. He chuckled at the thought.

“If only I’d been there,” he sighed wistfully.

“I certainly could have used the help,” Caliya replied, knowing exactly what he meant.

“Yes,” he agreed. “That’s precisely what I would have been doing. *Helping.*”

She nodded approvingly. “And they say you’re not a kind man.” The scholar rubbed her hands together before she could think too much about how Divayth Fyr’s unique charm was growing on her, and moved on. “Anyway. So destroying the brain of a nix hound only turns it into an even more mindlessly unpredictable projectile of meat and metal, so what do we do instead?”

She laid her hand on the insect’s abdomen and adjusted its kineticism, braiding more of Lord Seht’s power into her spell. It was getting noticeably harder to find ambient divinity around Divayth’s thick aurbic shadow. But not impossible. The machine began to slow as time unwound through its mechanical joints, each movement taking more and more effort. Like it was swimming through oil.

“Watch its legs, Lord Fyr,” Caliya invited, crouching down. Divayth eyeballed her judgmentally for a moment, but took a reluctant knee. She pointed at the upper joints of the machine’s hind limbs. “Nix hound fabricants are delicate. Their bodies are dense and their jumping legs are

powerful, but flimsy. They achieve their launch velocities through elastic flexion, not kinesthetics motion like the kagouti. Their hind limbs engage stiff struts and bend them to coil for a leap, and they release that tension to propel forward.”

As she spoke, she pointed to the various reinforcing bars that flexed and curved each time the nix hound’s legs withdrew and sprang straight again to force its limbs to full length.

After a few iterations, she glanced at her audience.

Divayth continued to wait for answers.

“Cold,” she revealed, pushing herself back up to her feet. “Cold embrittles the metal enough to shatter it.”

And she whipped up a localized blizzard, curving a bitterly icy wind through the specimen chamber. Divayth picked himself back up and watched silently as she focused the chill on the machine and eased back on its kinetic restraint. A fancy bit of magic, if she did say so herself, but she held no expectations that present company would care.

As the nix hound’s movements returned to speed, frost webbed its gleaming metal edges. Thrumming cracks resounded through its legs. Caliya raised a ward as she prepared for rapid disassembly, and moments later the nix hound’s right leg shattered into metal shards. Its left exploded just as spectacularly, flinging brass splinters against the cylinder’s walls and spraying more debris out into the chamber.

The machine continued to tear itself apart in a more grotesque manner after that, literally working itself to death. Freed from their own momentum, the stumps of its limbs ground against their inner workings, tearing through frozen metal and tissue alike. Oil and blood began to seep down the creature’s chassis and drip thin lines onto the grate below until it finally juttered to a halt, like a wind-up toy exhausting the last of his power.

“...Gruesome,” Divayth remarked academically.

“Satisfying every time,” Caliya argued, knocking against its cold metal thorax. “I’ll never know what Lord Seht was thinking when he ‘invented’ these pests, but he doesn’t mind when they’re slaughtered, and that’s permission enough for me.”

“Sil’s motives are certainly inscrutable,” the wizard agreed, stepping down from the specimen container. Metal crunched under his bootheel.

That was a surprising comment to hear. Caliya followed him out, dusting more shards out of her robe’s coarse weave. “Think so?” she asked, starting off toward another cylinder. “Even for you?”

Divayth kept stride with a smirk. “The compliment is acknowledged, Ms. Derynval, though I’m not certain how useful a mental comparison between myself and your ostensibly academic peers is. Yes, I too find Sil to be a difficult puzzle to crack even at the best of times. It’s what I like so much about the mer.”

Caliya paused before her two verminous fabricant specimens, struggling to decide which one would be better to destroy. They had both been so difficult to acquire. It almost felt unfair to have to give one up.

“Really?” she asked, more to buy time than anything. “I thought you hated secrets.”

That drew a frown. “Do you? And where did this rumor come from?” he asked, tucking his arms behind his back. “I don’t enjoy secrets kept *from me*, any more than the next master wizard. But secrets and puzzles themselves are a pleasant curiosity to uncover and solve.” He eyed her narrowly. “Which, if I’m being perfectly truthful, is what disappoints me so much about your clockwork order. One would assume that such sentiments are shared by all. And yet it seems that a growing subset of your ruling body revels not in solving a mystery, but in the mystery itself. As if there is some merit to confusion. Equating certainty with blasphemy. Discovery as an act of sin.”

The left one, she decided.

“I’m not really the sort for politics, Lord Fyr,” she apologized, crossing to the button beside the specimen container and glancing back. She didn’t like talking about the rest of them. Especially not to powerful company she didn’t really know well. “If the others want to obfuscate their idiocy by couching it in glorification of ignorance, far be it from me to stop them. That’s Lord Seht’s decision to make, as far as I’m concerned. His disappointment to bear.”

She pressed the button. Divayth's piercing scrutiny was beginning to unsettle her again. She wasn't the one on display here. The fabricants were.

"I'm not beholden to the Clockwork Apostles so long as I live out here," she finished. "If you want a philosophical discussion of their degrading quality, take it up with the god they worship. Lord Seht keeps me busy enough creating his reference manuals. I don't have time to dismay at yet another piece of his world falling to ruin under its own neglect."

The brass cylinder rotated into its housing, revealing an inert verminous fabricant curled into a loose wheel suspended from a series of mechanical fingers.

Divayth's academic gaze turned predatory.

"Creating reference manuals? Is that what you think you're doing out here?" he asked softly, closing the gap with a few swift strides.

## A Second Motive

### Chapter Summary

Caliya's consistent recalcitrance forces a deeper truth about his interest out of Divayth. But it isn't as assuring as he might think.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

What part of ‘she didn’t want to talk about it’ was he not understanding?

“It doesn’t matter what I think I’m doing out here,” Caliya replied sharply, backing away a half-step. His insistent curiosity in her was getting on her nerves. “Are we here to talk about me, Lord Fyr, or do you want to know how to destroy a verminous fabricant and get on with your life?”

The wizard scowled darkly at the rebuff. His lip curled in frustration. “Must you be so difficult?”

She stared him down, undaunted. “*I’m* difficult?” Sure, alright, normally she was. But not this time, for once. “You came here for this one reason, and I’m trying to help you with it. How is that difficult?”

“Why are you so averse to any deviations in topic?” he challenged, scowling. “You’ve piqued my curiosity, Ms. Derynval. A lone scholar suffering through an abysmal life in the forgotten wastes of a negligent god? One might think such a solitary soul would enjoy commiserating with a sympathetic mind.” He folded his arms arrogantly. “Do you know the sort of weight my conversation carries with the average mer?” Divayth asked. “The sorts of things a young mage might be convinced to do for the mere promise of a chat with me? The groveling self-debasement any member of the Brass Fortress would sink to for a moment of my time?”

Caliya didn’t blink. “Really? Even the Slag Town orphans?”

The ones he was so happy she’d once counted herself among? None of them would have been impressed by a mer of his caliber, and neither was she.

Divayth’s lips parted, but no words came out. She watched him clench his teeth, curl one hand into a loose fist, and turn his head to scowl back at the empty and ruined specimen chambers they had left behind. Aurbic might howled a sharp wind through her chest, lashing against her soul like a sandstorm. She held steady as a rock, refusing to be intimidated despite her own nervous pulse pounding in her ears.

“Look,” she began as gently as she could manage before he brought the whole cavern down around them--

“Is it truly the subject matter you find odious, or is it me?” he finally asked, turning his focus back to her. His tone was surprisingly even. “Have I done something to offend you? You lot are traditionally thicker-skinned than this, but if my comments about your food and your god were too much, do be frank.”

Her food and ‘her god’ had nothing to do with it. What did he want to hear? Caliya fidgeted with the specimen container, at least relieved that he was calming down. “I just don’t see why it matters, muthsera,” she replied neutrally. “Surely you have better things to do with your time than quiz some reclusive field scholar about her life. Like clear out your undercroft, for instance.”

“And that is *your* decision to make?” Divayth countered. “What I do with my time is my own business, Ms. Derynval. I am a traveler. An explorer of realms mundane and fantastic. I see the local sights, I try the local cuisines, I meet the sentient natives--”

--“Didn’t try my cuisine,” Caliya slipped in before she could stop herself. Seht’s brass balls, she

could have broken her own teeth, if Divayth didn't get to them first.

"I don't eat things that I *know* will kill me," her company replied, unflinched by the interruption. "And if we're being perfectly honest, it should have killed you, too."

And it probably would have, if she wasn't adept at healing. Despite her uncertainty she tilted her head in reluctant agreement. He had a point, even if it wasn't the one he was trying to make.

"If I must be perfectly transparent," Divayth continued, "Sil equipped me with the expectation that I would find a kindred spirit in these halls. And despite your insistent recalcitrance, I am still inclined to believe him."

What?

"A kindred spirit?" Caliya echoed, raising an eyebrow. Lord Seht...told him they'd get along? She didn't get along with anyone. Did the Father of Mysteries know her at all? "Have you considered that he meant one of these?" she asked flatly, gesturing at the limpid verminous fabricant welded to the cylinder. "I hear some of the fortress citizens keep the nix hound variants as pets. They're very trainable."

"Oh, don't insult yourself," Divayth sighed, "I assure you, I need no assistance in that endeavor. Obviously, he meant you."

Caliya exhaled slowly, trying to piece together what that meant. Self-loathing humility aside, Lord Seht did everything for a reason. He'd sent Divayth here not just to extract assistance, but to make an attempt at befriending her, too?

Why?

"...You could have led with that knowledge," she finally replied, tapping the brass cylinder restlessly. "Would have made everyone's lives easier."

Divayth's eyes darted around her face. "I thought you didn't worship the ground he walked on," he probed keenly. "You need his approval for your work; you also need his approval for your company?"

Caliya scowled. "Of course not." She turned away and stepped into the verminous container, prying open the creature's mouth to find the hooks that would unclasp its helmet. Enough of this meaningless chatter. The faster they finished, the faster he'd be gone. "But it's nice to know that's why you've been so invasive about irrelevancies. Unfortunately, it doesn't really help settle my nerves."

The catches popped. Oil seeped down her fingertips and the machine's neck. She wiggled the helmet's clamps off the hinges of the machine's lower jaw.

Divayth closed in behind her. Aurbic pressure like a hand against her spine.

"The thought of enjoying my presence makes you nervous?" he asked, peering over her shoulder. Caliya looked down at the brass skullpiece between her bloodstained hands.

"No," she replied. He really was going to be relentless with his questions, wasn't he? Fine. "What makes me nervous is the thought of death."

## Chapter End Notes

Lord Seht the matchmaker. ;) But Caliya knows her god a little too well to think that anything could be THAT straightforward or simple when the Father of Mysteries dips his fingers into the river of fate.

# The Insignificance of Mortals

## Chapter Summary

Caliya and Divayth's confrontation comes to a head as he forces her to admit the reason for her stubborn behavior. But nothing in the Clockwork City is simple, and neither are the roots of her fear.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Caliya was going to have nightmares about that persistent stare. Those thousand-year eyes doing everything in their power to pin her in place. Divayth's deepest scrutiny was exactly like Sotha Sil's. The both of them, ancient beings gazing right through her skin and studying the very stuff of her soul.

What in Oblivion had she done to deserve any of this?

"You can't be serious," he decided. "You think I'm going to kill you?"

"It's likely," she fired right back.

The mer scowled. "More likely with commentary of *that* nature."

She gestured at him with the verminous helmet, accidentally slinging fluids in his direction.

"That's exactly what I mean."

They both watched the droplets spatter across his pristine plate.

Sorry," she added.

With a crackling fizz the mess burned to smoke, leaving no mark or ash behind. Even a subtle flow of power from the master wizard whispered almost physically through her chest.

"You think I lack self-control in the face of irritation," he continued, as though nothing had happened.

It wasn't phrased as a question.

"People kill for less," Caliya replied, feeling her resolve finally begin to crack. Sickness hollowed out her gut as she watched him mull over her words. There was more to it than that, obviously. But she didn't want to be talking about this. A tiny seed of doubt in the back of her mind was blooming into a thorny tangle of fear, and the more it remained the subject of conversation, the wilder it grew.

"Is this some rumor you've heard?" he asked. "About my temper? My legacy? My power?"

"Muthsera..."

He resumed that thinker's stance, perching an elbow on his wrist and smoothing down his goatee. "No, no. I've had enough. Come now. You claim to live alone in the wilds, visited occasionally by Sil and making resource trips to the fortress from time to time. Your bookshelves are lined with the masturbatory navel-gazing of your fellow Apostles and a handful of guide books to Nirn Above, and nothing else. You spend your days tinkering about with Sil's creations, and recording what you find. How much could you possibly know about me? We have never met, as you so eloquently announced upon my arrival with your utter lack of recognition. Or are you afraid of *any* powerful wizard who shows up on your doorstep asking what you think of your life?"

Caliya smoothed some flyaways off her forehead and set the verminous helmet on a ledge along the inner container wall. "Would it help at all if I said it had nothing to do with you?"

Divayth's frown deepened. "Tremendously -- if I were to believe you. Which I don't." He picked at the edge of his lower lip a moment. "Understand, Ms. Derynval. I make no effort to maintain my reputation in either a positive or negative manner. History will judge me as it always

has -- according to deed, power, and the agendas of those who fill the coffers of the royal historian. What piques my curiosity is how you -- a reasonably isolated woman -- have come to this conclusion about my propensity for violence. You're certainly not the only one to hold this opinion, but I must know where it came from."

Well, time to disappoint again, it seemed. Caliya avoided his scrutiny by uncurling the verminous fabricant, interfacing with a panel on the inner lining of the specimen chamber, pressing buttons and pulling levers of the mechanisms that controlled the struts holding it in place.

"Believe me or don't, muthsera, but I promise it isn't you," she insisted quietly while she worked. "Or at least, it isn't *just* you." She dared a glance at him, and regretted it. He was fixated on her still, barely blinking. "It's Lord Seht."

The master wizard's head tilted half a degree. "Did he predict you would die by my hand?"

"No." She shook her head. "No. It's just..."

The words were difficult to find, and she knew why.

Divayth, however, was merciless. "Spit it out or I *will* offer you a reason to fear for your life."

"Sure, yeah, threats have definitely worked so far," Caliya fired back reflexively, wetting her lips. Oil and salt coated her tongue.

Hot power raked through her soul, flaring into a bright blue flame in the wizard's fist. "If you think my threats empty, perhaps I should fill one," he hissed, climbing into the chamber with her.

She flinched badly and ducked under the stasis struts to put something physically between them, flattening her back into the brass behind her. "No, no, I'm sorry! Please!"

Not yet--!

As quickly as it ignited, the fire snuffed, leaving Divayth's sharp, expectant glower in its wake. Greasy air wafted between them as Caliya hastily recollected her scattered wits. The wizard glared around the tiny specimen cylinder with a dark approval.

"Superb. You've fashioned your own cage. You're not leaving this chamber until you've answered my questions."

Superb indeed. She probably wasn't leaving this chamber at all.

"You have to understand," she began slowly, hoping she could get everything out without sounding like a lunatic, "things are different here."

"As opposed to where?" Divayth challenged flatly. "'Things' are 'different' everywhere, Caliya. What do you know of the world beyond your little slice of it?"

Oh, she hated the sound of her name on his tongue like that. Sent a chill down her spine.

"I do talk to people on occasion," she argued. "Adventurers who fell in here when I'm out in the field. Newly-sponsored citizens. Slag Town wastrels. I know *some* of Nirn Above. Real animals, giant cities, plants so abundant that their produce can feed an entire town. So easily grown that some of them are considered nuisances. Mountains. Rain." She waved her hand. "That's not important. This is Lord Seht's world. This is not Nirn. Here, everything has a purpose, and a place. And as long as those things are in their place, performing the duties of their purpose, they are under his protection."

It felt trivial. Stupid. Facile, to lay it all out. And yet Divayth had gone silent, resuming his academic interest while she spoke.

"Lord Seht does nothing without a reason," she continued, resigning herself to this conversation. "He strives to craft the future he wants. We've spoken at length about this, he and I. I'm not just taking the word of his sermons or their interpretations as squeezed through the pinhole brains of his most vocal followers."

Not a flinch from the wizard. Not even approval at the insult.

"Except unlike the rest of us -- and maybe you," Caliya forged on, "he *sees* the future. *All* of it. Not just glimpses scried through a gazing-bowl or flashes attuned to a crystal orb. He sees all of it. Like a spider's web in all directions, tangled threads of choice. Action and consequence. And he picks through the threads, trying to find the future he sees most favorable to accomplishing his goals. And he traces the events required to manifest them, and he works to set those events into motion."

Divayth stroked his goatee thoughtfully. "I tend to think of him as more of an analogue to Hermaeus Mora. But Mephala fits..."

"More friends of yours?" she asked, just to give herself a moment to breathe.

"N--" The master wizard cut himself off with a sudden scowl of realization. "You don't know the Daedric Princes, do you?"

The Daedric Princes? So *that* was who all these people were.

"Not a clue."

Exhaustion painted Divayth's face, but he shook his head and waved away his disappointment. "No, of course not. You're a *good* disciple. No Daedric blasphemies for you."

"Funny you should say that," Caliya countered bitterly. "Here's where the story gets good."

Interest flashed behind the mer's eyes.

"I don't hold myself in any high regard, Lord Fyr," she told him. "We're all just playthings for people like you and Lord Seht, and that's what scares me. I work out here, I mind my own business. I keep up with local happenings in the fortress, even if I don't participate in politics. I try not to make a splash. Go ahead and look down on me for having my own brand of faith in the mer, but Sotha Sil isn't as neglectful as he seems."

A quiet harrumph. But Divayth let her continue.

"He cares, in his own way," she explained, wondering when she was going to make her point and understanding why her instinct to avoid this tedious story had been correct. "But he's also efficient. Ruthlessly so. He'll guide your path with a shepherd's care when you're useful to him -- directly or indirectly -- but the minute he's done with you, you're on your own. And that's where you come in, Lord Fyr."

She wiped her hand on her robe before gesturing at him, ensuring she didn't send any more clockwork ichor his way.

"We're just cogs. Gears, in Lord Seht's great machine. And despite the teachings of the Apostles and the sermons of Lord Seht himself, most cogs are good for about one thing. Turning the next cog. Envision this from my perspective, if someone like you can even attempt to relate to skeevatons and dovahflies like us. My whole life, I've failed to fit in. There seems no place for me in the Grand Mechanica. A spare part, as useless as the rest of Slag Town. I gave up on Apostles and settled out here, and enjoy a life of discovery unbothered by dogma and process. Lord Seht stops by from time to time for a chat and to discuss himself and my work. I've made a use of myself. I'm probably safe. But then you show up."

"A disturbance in your peaceful solitude," Divayth guessed.

Caliya shook her head. "More like the perfect marriage of opportunity and knowledge. There are two types of machines, Lord Fyr. Continuous labor, and single-use. If we're lucky, Lord Seht views us as the former. Useful mer who work our whole lives in service to a purpose. But not everyone can be. And brutal ends tend to come to those who aren't."

Divayth's chin dipped slightly in acknowledgment, and he cast another gaze around the specimen hall. "And you fear an end to your purpose?"

"Precisely," she agreed. "I can't know for certain until you've left and I'm still breathing, but I have a sick feeling that aiding you is the last thing I'll ever do."

The wizard was silent for a long time. Caliya's words hung in the air, and she hated how their memory echoed through her mind. Speaking her fear aloud made it feel so much realer. So much closer to manifesting. She watched his gaze roam about the hall, thoughts ticking away in his no-doubt prodigious mind.

He returned his scrutiny to her. "...A curious anxiety. Well, Ms. Derynval, I can assure you that I have no intention of killing you. As irritating as you have been, I have suffered the company of far worse personalities for arguably smaller rewards. As a wellspring of knowledge and a reasonably competent tutor, your strengths outweigh your character flaws."

"A glowing endorsement, muthsera, thank you," Caliya quipped sardonically. "A shame words are meaningless. Nothing you say will change my mind. It might not even be you that kills me." She nodded at the walls behind him. "Maybe one of these pipes backfires. Or I wake up a fabricant



that breaks free of its restraints and mauls me during routine inspection. I could attract the attention of the wrong factotum out in the field. It could be *anything*. My point is that my whole life could have been shaped and crafted by Lord Seht to serve the single purpose of teaching you about fabricants. Years of study, dozens of texts, meticulous illustrations, reference material, all in service of this moment. You're important enough, and whatever is connecting your undercroft to the Clockwork City might be enough of a threat to Sotha Sil's realm, that he could have dedicated an entire mortal's life to the single hour-long task of educating you."

Yeah, it sounded like lunacy. But he'd wanted to know. He'd quite literally trapped her in her own specimen containment cylinder to squeeze this insanity out of her.

Caliya drew a breath and released it slowly, lowering her attention to the verminous between them. That was it. That was her story. History would judge her, as he said. And so would Divayth Fyr.

The wizard drummed his chin pensively. He didn't speak for another few long seconds. Finally, a small smirk lifted one corner of his mouth. A single quiet chuckle escaped his chest.

"Well. I admit, you're far more self-aware of your own insignificance than most," he commented mirthfully. "Credit must be given for accepting this crushing truth. But you've failed to account for one curious piece of Sil's behavior."

"Have I?" Caliya invited, wondering what he hadn't yet told her.

Divayth nodded. "He sent me here to befriend you, not to kill you, yes?"

She exhaled in disappointment as the flicker of hope extinguished.

"No, I did account for that," she countered. "That's *why* I'm worried *you'll* kill me." She traced one of the fabricant's spines absently. "It really has nothing to do with your reputation or rumors about you, Lord Fyr. You discovered it early on -- I tend to run my mouth regardless of my audience." She looked from the machine to the wizard. "And Lord Seht knows I'd run afoul of your patience. That might be why he sent you when I was eating. When he knew I can't afford to turn down a meal. He knew I'd make you wait, and potentially start the process of stretching your tolerance until it snaps. He may have sent you here with this expectation *knowing* that your interest would set me off. Lied to you to get you to keep bothering me. To get me to say the wrong thing in frustrated anger, and when I'm finally done lecturing you, you snap your fingers and stop my heart, then collect up my books and fix your own mess. Then he sends in his factotums to clean up the place, and gets it ready for the next single-purpose mortal machine he needs to spend thirty years grooming. Quick, clean, complicated, but ruthlessly efficient."

Divayth's eyebrow flinched in consideration. "That *does* sound like Sil."

His concurrence hollowed a cold hole in her chest. A little more argument might have been nice. A little more pushback. But of course she couldn't expect any reassurance from a mer like him. And it was foolish to want some.

Something strange played out behind Divayth's eyes in the quiet that followed. They never left her, but plenty of unspoken emotions seemed to be arguing with each other for their chance in the spotlight. A quiet, somber melancholy seemed to win the day. He nodded softly and stepped out of the specimen chamber, freeing her from his brass prison.

"Well. I cannot argue with logic such as that," he decided with a strangely pensive academia. "Of course, it's pure speculation. But I have no firmer ground to believe Sil than you do to impeach his motives." He looked from the verminous fabricant back to her as she ducked back under its restraining struts and tentatively joined him. "Fine, then. Why don't we get on with this. I will strive to remain calm and on-topic if you make an effort not to press my temper. Whether or not you have lost some divine protection you believe yourself under, I can at least ensure that I will not be the one to test your theory."

Caliya nodded in quiet agreement, though she still had her doubts. Not pissing off Divayth Fyr was easier said than done, after all. But at least the cards were on the table.

Caliya's reasoning here is largely based on Proctor Luciana Pullo's entire character arc in the Clockwork City DLC. Nocturnal's invasion hasn't happened yet in this text, but it always struck me as profoundly disturbing that Sotha Sil would keep around a powerful battlemage for thousands of years to fulfill a singular prophecy that either (depending on, of all things, the Vestige's choice) causes her death or strips her of purpose and protection (to merely "delay her death" until some unknown later time). One has to think that if Seht does this in grand, important matters crucial to the upkeep and continuation of his holy work, that he would also guide smaller, less significant lives toward specific singular purposes as well.

And Caliya, explorer of the Radius and intrepid wasteland survivalist, has been around long enough to see some of the ways these "single-purpose machines" have met their gristly ends.

# "Discovery as an Act of Sin"

## Chapter Summary

Caliya finishes her crash course on fabricant biology with Divayth Fyr. But when a simple glass of water leads to not one but two more major, incredulous discoveries, Divayth realizes he is far from finished with her.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Divayth quieted significantly while Caliya took him through the ins and outs of verminous fabricants. If she'd have known the effect her confession would have on the mer, she would have made it as soon as she'd thought about it. His commentary, though still sharp at times, became sparse. He asked few questions. There was obviously something deeper at play here, but Caliya couldn't pin it down.

It didn't bother her too much, though. She felt appropriately safe enough, for now.

Verminous fabricants didn't have quite the same tricks as their nix hound or kagouti brothers. Or at least, she hadn't found many yet. Though they did have destroyable cognition modules, their relatively small heads, tiny eyes, and quick transformative abilities made these extremely difficult targets. Truly, brute force and blunt trauma simply worked best on the beasts. Like nix hounds, they could be slowed and damaged by cold, but they were not as fragile. Their bodies were significantly more organic by mass than synthetic, and consequently they had fewer exploitable Clockwork weaknesses. Ground-based assaults worked best on the machines -- pound them back into the earth they came from, collect their soul gems for power, and let the factotums sweep up the mess.

Or shatter their soul gems, too, if he wanted to be completely wasteful about the endeavor.

What little knowledge she could impart seemed to satisfy her company, however. Verminous were apparently rarer than nix hounds or kagouti in his undercroft, and therefore the lesser of Divayth's concern. Caliya offered to let him break the sample machine for his own practice but he declined, and he also declined an offer to practice destroying other kagouti or nix hounds in her specimen cylinders. He had gone from a keenly inquisitive academic to a stodgy old mer in a matter of minutes, and the shift in personality was...discomforting, she was beginning to realize.

She brought them back upstairs to the library and intended to leave him perusing her written work for keepsakes while she fetched some water for herself, but he followed her to the kitchen and watched her press fluid from her aqueous sanitizer with a critical eye. Why he didn't just stay put, she hadn't the faintest clue. But she was feeling better about his presence by now. Acclimating to his overwhelming company.

"I'd offer you some," she began with a smirk that felt more forced than natural, swirling the contents in the brass mug, "but the filtration mesh is deteriorating, and I never remember to acquire a new one at the fortress. The quality isn't really fit for a mer of your caliber, muthsera."

Divayth harrumphed and perched a contemplative elbow on his wrist again. "If your 'food' would have killed me, I cannot begin to imagine the suffering your drink would inflict. Let me see that."

Before she could stop him the wizard pulled the liquid right out of her cup. It hovered in an unsettlingly cloudy and vaguely tan-orange sphere between them. His nose wrinkled at the metallic tang wafting from it.

"You've crafted a new sort of beverage, as well?" he asked, studying it carefully. "From what?"

Did you harvest the fluids of those beasts and refine it?"

She attempted to take it back from him with her own telekinesis but his power surrounded the orb as an impenetrable shell. Trepidation tingled along her spine. Was he really going back to this? They were so close to the end.

"It's not new," she replied, keeping her tone even, "it's just water. A precious commodity in a oilslick like the Clockwork City, let alone anywhere outside the fortress. I thought we were done with personal commentary."

Divayth ignored her attempts to remind him about their agreement, peering more closely at the fluid and the strange, amorphous specks floating through it.

"This is meant to be water?"

"*Please* give it back," Caliya insisted. "I don't have much. It's 'recycled,' if you can guess what that means in less polite t--NO!"

With a distasteful flick he dropped it to the ground, and seized her arm before she could drop herself to "catch" it. His dark warmth filled her, power threading through her bones, drawing her upright and away from the wasted splatter now coating her floor.

"Have some *dignity*, Caliya!"

...Dignity?

How dare he. How dare a man who'd never wanted for anything lecture her about desperation. She fought him with a snarl, forcing his magic out of her body, and was about to unleash a fierce lecture on the scarcity of resources and their precious value when she lifted her eyes to his...

...And saw between them the clearest, crispest ring of fluid she'd ever encountered, quivering gently as it balanced on the tips of his two fingers.

"Such quality is unfit for an academician of your caliber, as well," Divayth told her softly, calmer now that she had stopped. He raised her cup with his other hand and poured the water into it, then passed it back to her. "How much do you need?"

It was cold through the metal against her palm. She stared down at it, near-speechless at the beauty of such a clean drink.

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

"Tamriel," he replied. "Vvardenfell. The windward side of Red Mountain produces some truly spectacular springs and brooks most times of the year, which feed into the Odai River, and eventually flow into the Inner Sea." He glanced around the kitchen. "Consider it payment for the books, Ms. Derynval. Do you have a clean tank or other large storage?"

Payment for the books...

The fluid capacitor.

"Yes," she replied, looking at the pipes that drained the sink and blinking away impossible scenes of natural beauty as they played behind her eyes. She started toward the basin. Hesitated. Changed her mind. Lifted the cup to her lips. One solution at a time. She needed to calm her racing thoughts. He'd just have to wait a second.

Cold, clear water flowed down her throat. A refreshing, delicious shock to her system. Its chill seeped into her chest. Her eyes closed as she drank, barely breathing between swallows, but after a few lengthy seconds something strange occurred to her.

The cup was not getting lighter.

He was continuously filling it, levelling the surface even as she did her best to drain it dry. It was still nearly full when she finally came up for air. The clockwork machine stink of her house displaced the cool freshness in a single inhale -- disappointing, but a sensation that paled in comparison to the water itself. For a moment she just stood there, feeling cleaner than she could remember ever being.

A painful knot rose in the back of her throat. She forced back the tears before they could sting her eyes. Why was she crying? Why did she want to cry over this?

"Show me where I can store more," Divayth requested, tucking his arms behind himself again. "Such a precious commodity I am certain you must have a significant repository for."

"Yes," Caliya repeated with a nod, looking around herself as she gathered her thoughts. She set

the cup down on the table and felt herself flinch as she let go, as though her body itself didn't want to leave it behind. "Downstairs."

She wasn't going to question the gift, and nor was she going to say anything else that might jeopardize it. It was too valuable to risk. If Divath could provide her clean, natural drinking water from Nirn Above with this level of ease, she would take as much as he cared to offer. Before she could think too hard about it, the scholar led him back to the stairwell and down to a deeper floor than the specimen chamber. Down where the groaning, creaking, and clanking of old machinery was louder than ever. Rhythmic. Repetitive. Familiar.

And, like the noisy hinges of the front entrance, in desperate need of basic maintenance.

On the lower floors she stored her provisions, behind a tightly-closed and magically-sealed slab of a door. Most of the mechanisms were in place to keep raiders out, or to stop the Apostles from striking a truly devastating blow against her self-sufficiency if they ever got serious about reclaiming her into their fold. But they also kept the smell at bay, a fact she only just now remembered as she set about algorithmically undoing each interwoven arcane lock and mundane bolt.

The realization didn't slow her in the slightest. He'd just have to deal with it, like he'd dealt with everything else around here so far.

She could feel Divayth behind her, watching her work.

"...I've witnessed full excavation teams attempt to pry open the inner sanctums of a daedric stronghold with greater ease," the mer remarked after a few iterations of deadbolts and puzzle circles.

"Perhaps they should have asked Lord Seht to design their seals," Caliya replied neutrally, wondering how much of this process someone like him would be able to repeat by memory alone. He was studying her closely, aubric pressure like an elbow atop her right shoulder. From the corner of her eye she could see his head following the attention of her hands. A smirk widened his cheek.

"Yes, I am certain he would have been eager to assist."

"He seems the helpful sort," she agreed distractedly. "Just like you."

Divayth's dark chuckle was nearer than she expected. "It certainly would have saved a few lives. Some of the extraplanar horrors those slipshod fastenings released were truly remarkable..."

He was looking for conversation again. Caliya fell silent, acting as though her work took more focus than she could spare for a chat. The wizard almost physically deflated beside her, no doubt disappointed with her continued lack of interest in his daedric specialty.

As the last tumbler gears rotated into place and the final arcane ward dissolved into a slowfall shower of purple sparks, she drew a steadying breath and prepared for the worst. A brief thought to warn him crossed her mind. She decided against it. On the one hand, sure, it wasn't particularly pleasant in there. But on the other, Divayth Fyr was a transliminal master, a man who had purportedly seen the worst Oblivion had to offer, and escaped alive.

He'd be fine.

And if it disgusted him enough to flee quickly, all the better.

The stench slipped free almost as soon as the door was cracked, eager tendrils of blood and decomposition displacing the chemical tang of metal and grease to claim the air as their own. Caliya stepped through quickly and kept her mouth shut, throwing on the lights with a heavy clank of a lever by the wall.

Dim lamps flickered blearily to life across the oppressively-low ceiling, revealing the source of the smell. Or, rather, several sources. Barrels containing the last of her Nutriment Paste lined one wall. All but one were open, empty, and crusted over, awaiting a long-overdue cleaning. In the far corner a collection of glass-and-brass time stop chambers hung at eye level, filthy with a spattering of fluids that mostly obscured the half-carnivorized fabricants frozen within. More squalid mess clogged a trough drain beneath. An array of mechanical implements repurposed into butcher's tools sat in their own slime on a wide meat-carving table beside them, and more of the same hung from the wall behind it. Scattered along the edges were the carcass-like remains of gutted mechanical skeletons she hadn't yet gotten around to disposing of. Streaks of black and smears of

blood and rust painted brass panels, exposed tubing, and pipeworks nearly floor to ceiling.

Across the way sat an enormous brass vat studded with circular windows. The fluid capacitor. This was their goal, and ostensibly the cleanest thing in the room. Even still, it was covered in smudged hand prints of varying earth-tone hues. Angular patches from prior leaks here and there were lined at their seams with discoloring tarnish.

A thin strip of glass spanning the capacitor's height displayed the fluid level within. Barely a fifth full. About knee-high, Caliya estimated as she crossed to it, ignoring Divayth's mild but audible disgust at the clockwork charnel house he'd been led into. The most she'd ever had at once was half, and that was a long time ago. Back when she could be a little more libertine with her resources. Back when the Apostles didn't mind her carting tankfuls of industrially-reprocessed water out of the Halls of Regulation every other week.

She gestured to the fluid capacitor, hoping Divayth understood. She didn't trust herself to say anything that wasn't a scathing self-rebuke of her revolting lifestyle or a cutting anticipation of his response to it. She knew what this place was. There was nothing she could say to make it any better. It spoke -- and stank -- pretty clearly for itself.

But rather than set to work, the wizard studied his surroundings. The second his lips parted, a tight band coiled around her gut like a stubborn brassilisk.

"Whatever you're going to say," she intercepted despite her better judgment, "trust me, Lord Fyr, I know."

He frowned at her, but she didn't back down.

"Remember I didn't invite you here, muthsera," she pressed on, shame twisting into defensive anger. "I didn't *ask* for your company. This is just where I store my water. You want to pay me for the books, be my guest. You asked for storage, that vat is my storage. And then you can collect your books and leave, and get back to your life, and never sully your pretty armor in a filthy place like this again. I don't need to hear how disgusting this is."

Or he could change his mind and leave without 'paying' her. She didn't care. Just as long as she made it out of here alive.

Divayth considered her words with a narrow stare. Caliya could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Every damn one of these outbursts could be her last, and yet she couldn't stop making them. But she stood by her words. She didn't want pity, or scrutiny, or judgment. She just wanted peace and solitude.

And water.

Lots and lots of water.

The wizard nodded slowly and thoughtfully, revulsion shifting to interest. Caliya gestured more emphatically to her vat but Divayth raised a patient hand and walked away, opting instead to investigate her fabricant carving station more closely.

Her arm fell to her side with an echoing *spat*.

Perfect. Just what she wanted. Exactly the reason she'd brought him here.

Caliya hesitated, torn between following and keeping her distance. She decided to split the difference, tracing a wide circle around Divayth to see what he was looking at from afar. As much of a fuss as she dared to kick up, she knew that she was ultimately powerless here. If Divayth Fyr had set his mind to something, she couldn't really stop him. And it was her fault for bringing him down here without considering the consequences, anyway.

Either this was all part of Lord Seht's grand plan...or it wasn't.

Arcane light surrounded one of her nastier bone saws. It freed itself from the muck adhering it to the table with a squelching pop and rose into the air.

"I suppose Sil's factotums cannot be tasked with the purpose of disassembling fabricants for their meat," he mused, studying the blade as it rotated lazily before him. "Such a purpose would conflict with their base orders to preserve their creators' inventions."

She let him speak. She'd done enough damage already.

He didn't look at her. "Have you none here at all, though?" the wizard asked. "The Brass Fortress is overrun with the clockwork lackwits, harassing the citizenry with rules and attempting

to be useful.”

A searing flash travelled the looped length of the tool, burning a significant amount of filth from it. But some caked-on ichor still remained, resisting even a master sorcerer’s attempt to cleanse it completely. “One would think a manse of this size would require a small army of the machines for upkeep, particularly since you lot keep no slaves...” He turned to her to finish. “And, quite obviously, your life suffers for lack of assistance.”

Caliya averted her gaze, looking down at the blackly-stained fingers of one hand. Yet another thing she didn’t want to talk about. Of course she didn’t have help. She’d never dare consider factotums out here. Mechanical butlers, like running water and nutriment pipes, were a luxury of the fortress. Another cost of living outside the tyranny of the approved Apostolic lifestyle. Not that she could sustain them anyway -- she barely had enough power at any given time to light three rooms at once, let alone supply charging stations.

“...You see why I’m willing to forgive Lord Seht for his neglect,” she half-muttered, looking up. “One busy mer can only do so much.”

The spark of realization that widened Divayth’s eyes flinched her. Her bone saw returned to its bed of slime.

“And this satisfies you?” he asked, crossing back toward the great brass water vat. He paused by the fabricant globes and regarded their spattered glass. “Living this way?”

Caliya retreated to the giant drum as well, keeping her distance as though he was some feral fabricant or a security factotum in the Radius. “It beats living in the Fortress.”

“But you’re...happy here?” the wizard pressed, displacing the contents of the tank with a wave of his hand and a pulse of aurbic power. “What did you call it-- ‘Crafting Sil’s reference manuals?’ This is enough of a purpose for your life to justify such ascetic, vile poverty?”

The capacitor began to fill with crystalline water. Caliya wetted her lips just thinking about another cup. Something unwound between her shoulders as she watched. A stress she didn’t realize she’d been carrying, drained away.

“It’s the lesser of two evils,” she sighed, touching the metal with something like reverence. It didn’t matter what his opinion of her was. Before another hour had passed he’d be gone, and this -- all of this precious water -- would remain.

Divayth’s exhale was a clear expression of distaste. He shook his head and looked away. “The whole of Nirn -- the entirety of the Aurbis -- open to you people, and you choose *this*.”

Caliya lifted her eyes. A spark of anger twisted itself around her jaw.

“Oh sure, I’ll just pop right out to Vvardenfell for a day trip,” she spat, already wishing she could astral project her fist into her own fetching teeth. “Spend a few hours in the shade of the Valenwood. Take a tour around the Imperial City. Bring home some nice...” What did they eat out there? “Bread? *Fruit*?”

Divayth met her glare with a raised eyebrow. “Your tone suggests mockery.”

Of course it did.

Was he serious?

“You realize I’m trapped here, yes?” she asked flatly. “Not everyone can just slip through the mundus as they please, Lord Fyr. Some of us are bound by the whims and so-called protections of the tribunal.”

The water in the vat stopped rising. The wizard lowered his hand, affronted suspicion painting his countenance.

“‘Trapped’?” he repeated with a note of incredulity. “Are you or are you not still an Apostle? Your caste is one of the few able to come and go as they please. Or did you lose access to the Doors of Egress when you left the Fortress?”

His pause was more of a gut-punch than she expected. Caliya swallowed nervously, willing him to continue his work. She wanted that water, and she regretted this newest dispute already, if it was going to distract him that much.

“The Doors of Egress are for the Congress of Calibration,” she clarified, forcing neutrality back into her tone. Only the highest of the order were free to leave.

“The Doors of Egress are for *all* Apostles,” Divayth countered with an academic edge.

“Special permission is required for anyone else,” Caliya argued, flexing and curling her fingertips restlessly.

Divayth’s brow pinched.

“Is this new?” he asked, folding his arms. “When were these changes implemented?”

They weren’t new. Where was he getting this idea from? They’d always been like that. She’d never been allowed to leave. All of her special requests had been denied as inessential frivolity or otherwise lacking adequate purpose. It was one of the many reasons she’d fled the Fortress. The torment of so close an escape -- inaccessible to her day in and day out -- became unbearable to live with. Not even Lord Seht could provide her an overriding permission to leave this gleaming cage.

At least, according to the living god himself.

Divayth awaited her answer with piercing scrutiny.

Caliya struggled to give one. There was something about his certainty that needled her. Something so plainly-stated and matter-of-fact about his understanding that it cracked the edges of her confidence. Surely someone like him wouldn’t be so brazenly incorrect without reason. But surely he wouldn’t know better than she did, either. She, who had lived here her whole life. She, who had fought with everything she had to claim this elite rank, forcing her way into the Clockwork Basilica tooth and nail, crawling hand over hand up from the Tarnished, through the Auxiliaries, proving her worth, brilliance, and dedication until even the most stubborn of the Congress could not defend a denial of her application to the Apostles themselves.

Divayth started closer, circling the vat and softening his voice.

“You mean to tell me that you cannot enter Sil’s Clockwork Basilica this very moment and pass through the Doors of Egress into Tamriel?”

“That’s correct,” Caliya replied, standing her ground as he approached. “Someone like me would need to submit an Absconsion Request. And wait a week for approval.”

Just like everyone else. At least, everyone who wasn’t Divayth Fyr. Or...Proctor Pullo, she assumed.

More confusion from the mer, like she was speaking a different language. But a thread of subtle realization laced its way through his eyes as he looked down at her.

“Have you ever seen another Apostle submit one of these requests?”

Submit one? It was a spectator sport, now? Caliya quirked an eyebrow. “No, I haven’t. There’s not exactly a queue of eager emigrants banging down the Proctors’ doors, if that’s what you’re implying. Plenty of them enjoy this place.”

What was he trying to get at? He was suggesting that all of Clockwork society had rallied around the singular purpose of keeping her here.

That wasn’t possible.

*“You’re important enough, and whatever is connecting your undercroft to the Clockwork City might be enough of a threat to Sotha Sil’s realm, that he could have dedicated an entire mortal’s life to the single hour-long task of educating you.”*

Her own words echoed back to her from the specimen chamber.

No.

That couldn’t be right.

Lord Seht was a utilitarian taskmaster, but even his cruelty had its limits.

Divayth seemed to have his doubts. He traced the rounded edge of the fluid capacitor with gloved fingertips softly and contemplatively as he studied her face. More cogs and gears ticked through his mind.

Slowly, he began to nod. He looked away, eyeing how much water was left to fill the vat with.

“Very well. I think I’ll have another chat with Sil very soon...” he remarked, stepping back to resume his work. With a rush of arcane power the fluid levels began to rise once more.

There was something dark in his tone, though. Something that lingered behind. Something almost angry.

Something that might have been a threat.



## Chapter End Notes

Divyath: damn bitch u live like this?

There are reasons for Fyr's generosity and interest here. Reasons he hasn't revealed just yet. More mysteries still unspoken. Of course, everyone's favorite master wizard is no stranger to injustice, but there's a lot more at play here than he's letting on. Things Caliya herself has no idea of. Things Divayth realized way back in Chapter 2, and even a little at the end of Chapter 1. Things that won't be revealed to the audience for quite some time, unfortunately. But hopefully it will all tie together nicely as the story continues to unfold.

This is the last chapter I'd pre-written before beginning to post here, so the next installments will be significantly slower in coming, but they'll be here. :D Just not daily uploads like this first batch.

# Sparking Resistance

## Chapter Summary

As the magnitude of Caliya's revelations settle in, Divayth becomes ever more determined to crack her shell. But can an ancient, opinionated sorcerer such as he balance this vast gulf in power dynamics against a genuine interest in the mer at the center of this strange situational riddle? Or will his deliberate provocation be too much for a cornered animal who seems just as likely to fight him to the death as she does to chew her own leg off to flee?

How far can one bend a machine forged by the hand of a god before it breaks?

## Chapter Notes

I lied about the "no more daily uploads" thing, you get one more. I didn't expect to finish this little bridge so quickly. I hope you enjoy the perspective change ;)

Whatever Sil had planned, this evening was unfolding far more interestingly than Divayth Fyr could have anticipated. And despite the young Ms. Derynval's misgivings, he was far from ready to abandon her just yet. As much as it pained the master wizard to admit, some days Sil wore the self-appointed moniker "Father of Mysteries" well. He had certainly presented a curious puzzle of loose threads and strange knots, and the more Divayth tugged at its fraying edges, the more it unraveled, revealing yet-deeper layers of intrigue beneath. He looked forward to discussing this little sojourn with Sil at the mer's earliest convenience. Which, knowing the god, could be moons from now.

Caliya, for her part, seemed to be handling this fissure in the bedrock of her beliefs quite stoically. She teetered on the razor's edge between acceptance and rejection, no doubt weighing evidence in favor of both of their competing explanations for her impossible predicament. But Divayth himself was growing rather certain about his role in her so-called destiny.

And her role in his.

She wanted to be rid of him. That much was clear. And her reasoning was sound, given the circumstances. But those brief moments in which she lowered her guard allowed him a glimpse at her true personality, and he was determined to seek more. Sil hid all of his most precious treasures, after all. The stubborn Ms. Derynval made no exception of herself.

After filling her reserves they had retired to her library, and he allowed her to wash up properly while he perused her shelves and reclaimed his temper. The shock of learning that so much of Nirn's beauty had been denied to a woman so obviously longing for it -- based on her well-worn collection of guidebooks to cities and provinces across Tamriel (perhaps further "gifts" from Sil, now that he spared it some thought) -- had caught him quite off-guard. Injustice was, of course, a fact of natural life, but Divayth tended to associate such heavy individual manipulation with the petty tyranny of Vivec or the jealous, vengeful vanity of Almalexia. How lucky it was for him, therefore, that Ms. Derynval could explain Sotha Sil's own peculiarities, so easily overlooked when they had never before affected anyone of particular concern to the wizard.

But was anything really "luck" when Sil turned his eye to it?

Caliya herself returned as a transformed mer, dressed in a somewhat less-remarkably-stained robe than before, one whose predominant shades still bore a resemblance to the white cloth it had once been woven from. A few more inches of natural dusky glow had been reclaimed from the calico pattern of oils and greases that had painted so much of her skin. Her hair was still tied back into a limpid tail at the nape of her neck, but at least a few of the congealed clumps nestled within had been removed.

The Apostolic scholar regarded his approval with characteristic suspicion.

"Find something interesting in there?" she asked, nodding at the book in his hands.

"Plenty," the wizard replied with a smirk, closing it. He offered her a more obvious once-over as she approached. "I'm also pleased to see a Dunmeri woman beneath all that Clockwork grime. I was beginning to wonder if Sil had taught a particularly erudite skeever to walk upright."

Oh, the effect was spectacular. She stopped short, her quick wit processing everything in rapid succession, from the insult to its implication to the true compliment buried beneath. Unfortunately, her response left something to be desired.

"A shame you won't get to enjoy it for long, muthsera," she dismissed evenly, turning her attention to the rest of the tomes scattered on the table before him. "Have you decided what to take?"

So very to the point. It was still jarring, even now, to feel each and every rebuff. He was so used to *too* much attention from her Fortress peers that he struggled to consider ways to deal with none at all.

"Yes," the wizard answered a bit flatly, casting a glance of his own at her writings. "All of them."

Their eyes met.

"I believe I recall you telling me *any* books I wanted, I could take?" he challenged.

Ms. Derynval studied him quietly, a bit taken aback by his seemingly-absurd proposal.

"How about one copy of each of the published works, and we can talk about passage duplication of the unfinished pieces?" she haggled.

"Only one?" Divayth pressed. "You know, I could return that water to the Odai..."

He was only teasing, but the suggestion flushed her cheeks all the way to the tips of her ears.

"Don't you dare," she told him, eyes wide. Shock quickly hardened to anger. "What do you even want more copies for?"

"Who else is reading them?" Divayth countered, enjoying such fiery Dunmeri spirit on display. It was a vast improvement to her circumspect timidity, particularly now that he understood so much of their antagonistic relationship. "You take no visitors out here, after all. I can assure you all copies will be disseminated to those of keen interest in Morrowind, and parts beyond..."

More hesitation. Incredulity, mixed with intractable resolve. The war between caution and defiance raged within her. What would she be like, freed from Sil's divine oppression? What sort of woman had the living god stolen from this world? Ms. Derynval broke eye contact and fidgeted with the edge of the study desk, her slender fingers pressing their sharp edges deep into her skin as she looked around her collection scattered beside him.

"Fine. Leave me one copy of each," she decided, firm as a guar. "And don't you dare threaten me again." She fixed him with a thrilling glare. "I won't be blackmailed."

"Amusing that you think you can stop me," he began academically, "of course--"

Her indignation blazed. "I know I can't," she interrupted. "But I *won't* be trapped. I'll let you take it all before I bend to threats, Lord Fyr. The books *and* the water."

Such fearless rebellion. Her only recurring flaw -- apart from her attitude in general -- seemed to be that she spoke before she had a chance to think.

Correctable, though. With time. And guidance.

"Perhaps that is Sil's intention," Divayth replied, lacing his tone with soft threat. He wondered how far he could push her. "To leave you destitute."

She hushed immediately. All that rich color drained from her face, nearly as quickly as it had arrived. She backed away, looking around the rest of her library as though measuring the true

worth of her belongings. The price of her life's work.

Perhaps the price of her life itself.

"I've started anew once," she replied quietly. "I can start again. I didn't bend a knee to the Apostles, and I won't bend one to you, either."

Her words were brave, but her voice quavered. The strength of her will far surpassed the strength of that undernourished body.

Impressive.

Given her circumstances.

Divayth raised a placating palm. "Peace, Ms. Derynval, I will do no such thing," the wizard reassured. "Even I am not so cruel. Your water supply is safe from tampering, and to suggest otherwise was merely a joke." He smiled at her. "Obviously in poor taste."

He looked down at the bound text he was still holding -- *On the Peculiar Idiocieties of the Fabricant Nix Hound* -- and lifted its unfinished companion *Further Peculiarities of the Idiotic Nix Hound* from the table.

"I wasn't aware a second volume was in development," he remarked, changing the subject to defuse the situation.

It worked. Her shoulders lowered visibly, even though the suspicion didn't quite leave her eyes. She judged his intentions and found them acceptable, then nodded and came closer once more, picking the handwritten notebook out of his arcane grasp.

"Lord Seht wants an expansion," she told him, flipping through the pages. "Interesting of you to pick that one..."

"I quite enjoyed the first," Divayth admitted, watching her hands pause as she listened. "And meeting its author has offered a fresh perspective on the information."

"In what regard?"

The wizard smirked, wondering what else he ought to confess. Wondering what Sil had told her about her publications. What form her works took on Nirn proper. If he played his cards right, however, he could show her firsthand. And he'd rather like to see that spark of surprise -- and, perhaps, betrayal -- with his own eyes.

Assuming, of course, she was wrong about her god's intentions for her.

"It isn't every day one has the opportunity to meet the personality behind the pen, Ms. Derynval," he replied brightly, gathering up more of her unfinished works into a levitating stack beside himself. "Tell me, my dear, do you have a lounge or a study of some sort?" He glanced around her austere shelves, noting her lack of chairs. "Perhaps a balcony? Surely a sprawling abode such as this contains at least one room with a view?"

# Memory and Prophecy

## Chapter Summary

Caliya takes Divayth to a chamber known as the Recollective Zenith, intending to fulfill his request for a room with a view. But circumstance continues to lead them astray when they discover a seed of truth left by Lord Seht for his favored student to find.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Now* what was Divayth after? As grateful as Caliya was that the master wizard had given her a minute of privacy to clean up, she was beginning to wonder if leaving him alone again had been another mistake.

The mer was back in high spirits after his quick “recovery” from their sojourn to her provisions repository, and somehow more determined than ever to converse with her. Questions bounced off the stairwell as she led him up to the Recollective Zenith. His curiosity peppered her thoughts. His aura pressed against her soul. It was as though some last piece had fallen into place in his mind. Some stuck sprocket jostled free. Learning that this life of hers wasn’t by choice, the realization that she couldn’t just pop out to High Rock or swing by Black Marsh, it all seemed a key that unlocked the floodgates of his true interest.

Not in fabricants, unfortunately.

But in her.

"*Another* vault?" the wizard self-interrupted with a sigh as they arrived at a heavy slab of a door at the crest of the steps, glowing with wards and chaining sigils.

"Contain your enthusiasm," Caliya replied distractedly, setting to work unlocking it.

"I'll be certain to redouble my efforts."

He perched close by, ostensibly to watch her cast. For her part, the scholar continued to fend off his queries. She was still quite rattled by their "confrontation," despite Divayth's insistence that it was some light-hearted jest. The dispute itself hadn't misaligned her gears, though; she believed his promise to keep her fluid storage safe from further tampering. As much as one could believe a mer like him, of course. No, what rattled her was her own reaction to his threat. The realization, made just as the words left her tongue, that she had been willing to face down a near-godlike master of arcana and dare him to take everything from her if it meant keeping her independence and refusing to bow to another's wishes.

This invasive little flash of insight had lodged itself deeply into her mind, distancing her from the chatter Divayth was trying to impress upon them. The locks and bolts gave her a fine enough excuse to pretend to be busy. But even still, his dedication didn't waver.

"How recently did you take up residence here?" the wizard asked, reaching out to trace some of the not-quite-dwemeri letters carved into one of the brass tokens she was rotating into its puzzle-lock.

"Touch it and you'll break the sequence," she warned, catching his wrist and pushing it away. "I don't remember. It's been at least--"

Caliya broke off and frowned down at his arm, briefly distracted by the difficulty she'd had in displacing it. Divayth followed her gaze with a curious eye, turning his own hand over as he sought what had captured her attention.

"At least...?"

"...At least ten years," she finished, returning her focus to the door.

"Ten years," he echoed, "and still you retain all of Sil's defenses. Have you not thought to remove them? Are they too difficult to dislodge? Or do you regularly find yourself in need of so many impressive bastions against hordes of clockwork mongrels?"

A faint smirk tugged at her lips as she spiralled the final puzzle apart. All of its pieces settled into their respective recesses, and the door unlocked with a smooth, distance pulse. A gratifying reward.

"Playing with the toys Lord Seht leaves behind keeps me sharp," she replied, leaning against the heavy panel. "And some places...just feel like they ought to take some time to get into."

Divayth harrumphed quietly. "After the last vault you so generously shared with me, I question your..."

But he never finished the sentence.

Soft blue light spilled through the widening crack. Caliya stepped into a spacious octagon, airy and bright enough to briefly pain her eyes. Seven of its eight walls were crafted of wide glass panels etched with intricate, frosted geometry reminiscent of the City's architectural tastes. Slender brass edges rimmed their joints, likewise stamped with interlocking angular braids and reticulated patterns. The eighth wall was, of course, also brass, and contained the door and dark stairwell they'd emerged from. Polished into the floor beneath a thin layer of protective glass was a meticulously-recreated series of circles and gear wheels and wide arcs that approached the Celstiodrome itself in grace and complexity. Studded between these great lines were hundreds of tiny gemstone cogs. These were the source of the blue glow, and they brightened further as Caliya neared them, activating in the presence of living beings.

Above, a mirror image of spirals and gears shined down from the capping dome.

The highest point in the observatory.

The Recollective Zenith.

"...Marvelous."

Divayth's voice slipped through the deferential silence that always overcame her in this place. "This will do nicely, Ms. Derynval." He followed the scholar to the center of the space, keen eyes raised skyward, and lingered there while she crossed its length. "Difficult to imagine this room and our former destination occupy the same building."

Caliya peered through the glass with a melancholic smile. "I haven't had a chance to grime this place up yet."

"Oh, give it time, I'm sure you'll get around to it. You did quite a number below, after all."

What little amusement she'd summoned faded quickly. All she really had around here was time. And filth.

Assuming the former wasn't about to run out.

She turned back to watch him study the design work overhead and underfoot. Her pile of books floated behind his shoulder like an obedient pet, casting a soft amethyst light across his black-plate pauldron. The gears shined brightly around him, she realized. Far brighter than for her. Nearly as bright as in Lord Seht's presence.

And, like Seht, he seemed to belong here. His natural habitat, surrounded by arcana.

The wizard looked around after a moment, and folded his arms expectantly.

"Do furnishings offend you?"

The room, beautiful as she found it, was completely bare.

"How many chairs does one woman need, muthsera?" she challenged.

"One would expect at least two, if this is where you host Sil."

Caliya shook her head. "No, not here. He hasn't touched this part of the observatory since he replaced it with the Planisphere."

The living god had only brought her up here a few times, almost entirely to teach her and test her ability to get in without his assistance.

Divayth smiled. "Ah. I knew this all looked familiar. Sil stored his memories here?"

"...Yes." Caliya was surprised, somehow, that the wizard knew what she was talking about. The

Mnemonic Planisphere didn't seem like something Lord Seht would share with him. Divayth didn't exactly give off the most trustworthy aura.

He fixed her with a strangely mischievous little smirk. A glimmer of youth brightened his eye as he approached. Bootfalls echoed through the chamber.

"Did he leave any behind?"

Definitely untrustworthy.

"Of course not," Caliya replied, folding her arms.

"Are you certain?" Divayth pressed softly, stopping almost too close for comfort. "Have you checked every star?"

Yes, she had.

Several times.

"Do you really think a mer like Lord Seht would leave something so important behind?"

Divayth chuckled and turned away, casting a sweeping glance across the Zenith. Power flared from his skin, spreading like dark tendrils, seeking the floor, the walls, the ceiling. Crawling. Hunting.

Invasive.

"If he did," the mer teased quietly, "I assume, by your deterministic logic, we are free to view it?"

Caliya watched his spell with growing unease. By her logic...yes. Lord Seht wouldn't allow them to find anything they weren't meant to, after all. She touched the brass frame beside her and slipped her own power through the conductive metal. A niggling warning tickled the base of her skull. She wouldn't compete with Divayth's sheer magnitude of aurbic might, but she could circumnavigate through more familiar media. Just to check.

And faster, it seemed.

The wizard noticed immediately, still smirking as she threaded the Zenith with her own investigative magic, searching every star-gear for a secret she may have missed. Warm power glowed deeply within his approving eyes.

"Not so certain, are you?" he taunted.

"You have a convincing manner about you, muthsera," she replied curtly, pushing back the pounding in her ears. "And now that I think about it, hiding a memory up here is exactly in line with--"

...With Seht's lengthy plans.

They found it together, twin elven gazes snapping to the northeast wall as their power touched the final gem near simultaneously.

A filled star.

No doubt precisely as planned.

"Well, well...What have we here...?"

Divayth started toward it, glancing back to see if Caliya was following. But she wasn't. A sickness had seized her, cold fear gripping her spine with teeth of ice as Seht's words echoed back to her from the past.

*"The last day..."* she heard herself whisper.

The wizard slowed to a stop, regarding her with interest.

"Hm?"

But she barely heard him. She knew she'd checked every star here before. She knew that this one had been empty, along with all the others.

Seht had filled it in her absence.

Recently.

Because he'd known she'd bring Divayth up here one day.

*The last day.*

This was it.

This *was* the end.

"Don't touch it," she instructed, forcing slag-filled legs to carry her closer. She banished

Divayth's lingering spell ephemera as it curled curiously around her. "Memories are delicate things." She dropped her power down through the brass, spreading her magic into the observatory's structural framework, searching for the tools she would need. They popped into existence around her, probes and awls, evulsers and extricans, and a simple glass reliquary etched with sigilistic enchantments around crisp geartoothed circles. "You can't simply plunge an unpracticed hand into the arcane and come out with an intact record to be viewed."

She sank to her knees, calling up memories of her own from the last day Lord Seht had brought her up here. How he'd walked her around the Zenith, pointing out empty fastenings and anchors along the floor's edges and the ceiling's rim. Ghosts of the great machines that had once hung from them, reconstructed with bursts of divine dust. He'd spoken for what seemed like hours about the current Planisphere, the meticulous transference of memory, how the wheels and circles interfaced to orbit the entire vault. A greater complexity to suit an ever-expanding library of thought, and an ever-growing need for more storage. Asked her if she would like to learn how to extricate one from a mind. How to conceal it within a crystal lattice. How to reclaim it, once stored.

Of course she'd said yes. She always said yes. If he asked, she was free to accept. And if she was free to accept, she'd always been meant to know.

*Take heed and hold fast to this knowledge, Caliya,* he had said, when they were done. *I will not show you again.*

*Take heed?* she had asked, dubious as ever. *When would I possibly need this?*

As if Lord Seht ever did anything without purpose. As if the god enjoyed teaching for the sake of teaching itself.

How naive she had been back then.

He had smiled so sadly at her for quite a while after she'd asked that question. So sadly and for so long that she had wondered if she'd failed some test of his. But he'd just nodded and collected up his tools and gifted them to her. And, as she took them, he'd spoken, soft and slow.

*On the last day, Caliya.*

Few things have ever scared her more than that sentence, searing this lesson into her brain just as Seht had asked. Burying it deep, until the moment it would be needed once more.

This moment. Right here.

*You will need to know this on the last day.*

*The last day?* she had repeated.

And his smile saddened further.

The memory was in the reliquary before Caliya realized she'd finished. The jar glowed like a lantern, shining with divine thought through the glimmering lines that gently caged it. She watched it twirl and dance, a speck of beauty far outshining the gem that had housed it.

The last day.

"Shall we?" Divayth asked, kneeling beside her, anticipation thick in his voice.

Of course they would.

As they must.

The elves climbed back to their feet and Caliya gathered her tools out of the way with a quick spell, ensuring neither of them would step on or break one. She fingered the keylock sigil briefly, just long enough to gather her resolve.

"Traditionally one ought to have a Reclaimaint Projector to pour the memory into," she lectured, hiding her fear behind academia. "But this is a duplicate. It doesn't have to be saved. Once I release it from the reliquary, it will play in full and vanish."

Further cementing the hollowing truth that she would never need to reference it again.

It, or anything else.

"I'll take careful notes," Divayth replied drolly.

His flippant sarcasm annoyed her. He had no idea. The bastard still thought they were meant to be friends, not killer and victim. But what could she say? What point was there in rehashing a truth he didn't believe?

None.



She broke the keylock without a reply, releasing the enchantment, and the memory within. Light poured from the glass, swirling like arcane embers in an updraft, reconstructing two figures from billions of glittering specks.

Lord Seht, of course, tall and regal as ever. And Proctor Luciana Pullo, of all people. In her mechanical hands was a single sequence plaque.

Divayth crossed to stand between them for a better angle from which to view the performance. Caliya followed, looking from one to the other as the Proctor began to speak.

"...She wants to leave the Basilica."

Seht gave a single, peaceful nod. "As she must."

"Where will she go? Barilzar's old lab?"

The god shook his head gently, and turned his gaze. For a brief moment he seemed to glance directly at Caliya herself, as if he knew she was standing there with them, listening, before returning to the Proctor.

"I have prepared her a new home."

Proctor Pullo studied his face, trying to read anything from Seht's unfathomable eyes.

"The Apostles will protest."

"And I must ask you to quell them, when they do."

Divayth lifted an eyebrow and flashed a curious smirk at Caliya. She raised her palm to keep him silent. This was no game, to her.

"She made one more request to leave," the Proctor revealed, offering the plaque.

"And you will deny this," Seht replied, taking it from her.

"Of course. As ordered," she confirmed. "Will you tell me why we're doing this to her yet? What's so necessary about keeping her in Clockwork?"

The god didn't immediately reply, choosing instead to read the plaque. A warm smile softened his features as he did. Caliya stepped closer to peer at it herself, and she could have sworn Seht's memory tilted it toward her as she did so. She already knew what it was, though.

Her last Absconsion Request.

"I...didn't know he read these," she half-murmured, heat flushing her cheeks. She hadn't exactly written them with anything resembling deference, especially by the time she was ready to be done with the fortress and its sneering upper class.

"To the esteemed Proctor, I bid you rejoice," Seht read with a small laugh, "for you hold in your hands the last Absconsion Request you will ever deny me."

Cold shame dripped through the scholar's veins.

"Oh no..." she whispered as Seht continued. Was he really going to read it all?

"...Or perhaps your joyless clockwork heart will weep at the revelation that this small, dictatorial satisfaction will be robbed from you, henceforth and forevermore."

A wide smile split Divayth's lips. Caliya pointedly avoided his gaze, but her burning ears caught his deeply entertained chuckle.

"I see we share similar opinions about Sil's mostly-mechanical gatekeeper," the wizard commented.

Seht continued, relieving Caliya of any burden to reply.

"I submit this wellspring of hopelessness as my fifty-seventh attempt to utilize the Doors of Egress mostly for posterity, and to bid you a personal, less-than-fond-farewell. I intend to flee the Basilica for the Radius in short order, preferring the solitude of the harsh wastes to your charming company and the invasive eyes of my dubiously-termed peers."

Luciana folded her arms with a keening slither of metal on metal. Caliya could only listen in helpless horror. Did this happen every time she sent in a Request? Not once had Lord Seht mentioned a single one to her.

"I will not bother to detail my reasons, either for my withdrawal from the Fortress or my absconsion request. If fifty-six separate rejectable occasions exist in your private little book of unfathomable legislative cruelty, I am certain no further possible scenario will convince you otherwise. If, by some slim miracle, there exists an oilstain of kindness greasing your brasswork

chest, I will make myself known in a week's time at the Fortress to collect an approval."

Divayth laughed aloud, visibly enjoying himself as he listened.

"If not, I will take your silence as my final repudiation. Cold regards, Caliya Derynval, Order of the Clockwork Apostles."

The wizard applauded as Seht finished and took a moment to reread the request to himself. Despite her harsh words, the Father of Mysteries regarded the plate with an unexpected fondness.

"Oh, brava, Ms. Derynval," Divayth snickered. "A masterpiece to be enshrined in the Library of Vivec."

"I was having a bad day," Caliya admitted, willing her ear-tips to stop searing with heat.

"This implies you've ever had a *good* day, my dear," Divayth countered brightly, "and I remain unconvinced that this is true."

"Shall I arrange patrols?" Luciana's memory asked, unaffected by the bevy of insults just dictated to her. Of course, she must have read them on her own, before this delivery. And this was not the first time Caliya had made her feelings known via formal submission.

"No." Seht reached out toward the corner of a desk that glowed into existence as his hand neared it. A pile of other plaques neatly-stacked on its surface rose into his grip. He added this latest one to the collection, and thumbed idly through them. "She will be safe. Her work has prepared her adequately for the trials ahead. Her will is invictus. You have played your part well, Luciana. I thank you."

The Proctor scowled. "You know I trust you, Lord Seht, but it better be worth it. You know I hate bending rules. *Especiall*y to make life worse."

The living god nodded serenely. "As you must. However, you may unwind your distaste, my friend. No longer shall I ask such partisan acts of you."

"Thank the gears," Luciana muttered. "Now will you tell me why this was necessary?"

Seht recollected the plaques in his hands and settled them back on the desk. Though his face remained downcast, his eyes flickered upward.

Right to Caliya. A second time.

"She must despise this place," he revealed solemnly, all traces of merriment absent from his tone. "And she must come to despise me. In time she will learn that your unyielding obdurance was a mere conduit of my will. And on that day her faith will break. And it will be the last day."

"The last day?"

The living god did not blink. Through the years, past to future, his memory unquestionably saw Caliya where she would one day stand.

"Her last day."

Only then did he return his gaze to Proctor Pullo. His hands gathered at his waist, ten brass fingertips interlacing in light, contemplative sequence.

Luciana shifted her attention between him and whatever he kept looking at, a frown deepening her stern brow. "And this is all part of some grander plan. Denying her a chance to see Nirn. Chasing her out of the Fortress. Banishing her to the Radius. Making her... 'despise' you." The Proctor shook her head, struggling to piece it all together. "By living out there, we keep even less of an eye on her activities and work. This seems a far-flung bargain, even for you. What makes you so sure all of this will come to pass?"

The living god spread his arms acquiescently, bowing in acknowledgment. The motion seemed natural to him, and surely would have appeared natural to Luciana. But the backs of his segmented fingers traced the curve of Caliya's cheek perfectly. Her skin tingled in anticipation of a feeling his ethereal memory did not impart.

"*Because it must,*" the scholar whispered.

"Because it must," the god repeated.

She reached up to touch his arm reflexively.

The memory dissolved beneath her fingertips.

## Chapter End Notes

Look at me, finally remembering (read: "Looking Up") what things like sequence plaques are called. This chapter actually wasn't planned, and it took so long to write because I had to figure out a better purpose for it than just "transition to the next scene."

And boi did I find a purpose. (I hope)

# Life After Death Predicted

## Chapter Summary

With all of their worst fears confirmed, Divayth seeks a premature wrap-up for this little misadventure. But the doomed Ms. Derynval isn't quite done with him yet.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As the luminous dust faded, Ms. Derynval remained silent for quite some time. Divayth contemplated the revelation as well, and its vast implications. A mix of emotions swirled in the wizard's breast -- curiosity, anger, and surprise chief among them; but, above all, disappointment ruled the hour. Even his amusement at the young scholar's insolent writing was short-lived in the face of such overwhelming dismay.

She was not to be his, after all.

His old friend had, indisputably, lied to him.

She was to die.

Somehow.

"...Well, that was unusually enlightening, for Sil," he opened, probing for conversation.

"You were right, muthsera."

Caliya's voice was stronger than he expected it to be. There was a dagger's edge to her tone. He met her fiery stare with an even gaze, gauging her to be at least as disquieted as he was, if not far, far more so. And of course she would be.

Better angry than weeping, he supposed.

"Yes," he agreed, watching her reaction closely. "My predictions were more accurate than even I expected." He smoothed down his goatee academically. "Which, I admit, is a rarity for me."

Not a trace of amusement on her lips. Her tools blinked out of existence, the glass orb and her many expertly-wielded brass implements banished back to the storage halls they had no-doubt been summoned from. Strangely, she studied her hands in lieu of a reply, deep in thought. There was a profoundly-set blackness to their tips -- ancient oil stains even a proper scrubbing hadn't been able to remove, it appeared. She turned them over as though seeing her skin anew. The hands of an alchemist, anywhere else in Tamriel.

But not here.

This place lived in her as much as she lived in it.

Divayth exhaled and turned away, eyeing the stack of writings he still held aloft. They were soon to be the last traces of so promising a woman.

"You too were correct, it seems," he added restlessly.

"About my death."

Cold now, her voice was. Deadly cold.

"Yes."

Ought he to push her? What more was there left to lose? Certainly Sil bore responsibility for the bulk of his own anger, but Caliya herself was not quite innocent, either.

"I must ask you, Ms. Derynval," he began, "why you presented this possibility of your death as just that -- a mere chance."

"What do you mean?"

He closed his eyes, willing patience upon himself.

*Keep up, I beseech you.* He had no time for her nonsense. Distress was no excuse for idiocy.

“In the specimen chambers, you theorized about the truth of Sil’s intentions for me,” he began. “Yet before you extracted this memory I distinctly heard you echo the mer’s words. Regarding your ‘last day’...” He turned to face her. “You knew. This was no hypothesis.”

She met his gaze. Lightning flashed behind her eyes. “He’s predicted my end before, Lord Fyr,” she agreed bitterly. “We all die one day. I didn’t know it would be today. So soon. Surely you’ll forgive me for hoping I’d have a bit more time to suffer.”

That softened his ire. Or at least turned its fangs from her. “You knew the cause of your demise, but not the hour?”

She shook her head. “Not even that, muthsera. Merely the events that would precipitate it. Not when they’d occur.”

*Hmph.*

“These events.”

“Yes.”

He watched her wrestle the storm brewing inside her. Several times now he had sparked her ire and she had lashed out at him over minor trivialities. Yet here she stood, in quiet fury, still managing temperance with a mer who was not the target of her rage.

Curious.

Another facet he would never explore.

“I suppose you would like to cut short this visitation, then,” he offered, lifting a palm and guiding her works toward her. Mephala knew he was done with this charade. “Live out your final hours in something resembling peace.”

He wouldn’t pretend to understand this strange relationship Sil had with his reclusive student. And frankly he had better things to do than wade through it. He had enough of what he had come here for, and unlike Ms. Derynval he was not content to be a pawn in his friend’s deterministic games. And he was quite irate about Sil’s attempts to make one of him.

She didn’t take the books, however. In fact, she regarded the stack with something approaching disdain.

“No.”

The scholar met his scowl with stoic certainty. Of all things to win the day, a sly confidence colored her tone.

“I’m meant to teach you, aren’t I?”

Smooth as a blade, her power slipped through his, cleaving the top notebook from the stack and lifting it into her hands. “And you wanted a view...”

She started off across the room, gesturing to him to follow. Her poise was something to behold. “Come, Lord Fyr. If today is to be my final day, I will endeavor to impart unto you as much knowledge as you care to tolerate.”

The wizard caught up to her in a few sweeping strides. “He’s predicted your death with mere hours to spare and still you serve him?”

“Now now,” she chided with scathing academia as she reached the wall. Her pinning stare met his dubious gaze. Black fingertips teased the frame joining the Zenith’s great glass panels. “Let’s not waste a god’s forty years of diligent work, hm? Most among us don’t even receive *this* much courtesy from a mer of his stature.”

The scholar pressed a panel hidden in the brass patterning. Sharp blue light threaded the metal, spreading like water along stamped channels and decorative grooves. A distant rhythmic clanking pulsed through the floor. Divayth’s gaze followed the aurbic flow, down through gears and chains hidden within the architecture. They withdrew all seven of the Zenith’s glass panels into the floor, revealing a wide brass promenade wrapping the tower, lined by a gleaming, angular handrail. Oil-smooth mechanics, unlike anywhere else thus far in the mansion.

And beyond awaited the plaything of a god.

A touch at the elbow drew his attention. Guidance from the young scholar as she led him across the threshold and out onto the balcony. Cooling air with Clockwork’s signature metallic tang swirled around them, never quite reaching what he might describe as “fresh.” Even under an

ostensibly open sky, the light breeze carried particulates from the machinery that recirculated it, preventing the wizard from ever forgetting that this world was not of nature.

Clearly beautiful. And undoubtedly impressive. But cut from whole cloth artifice, through and through.

The splendor of the assembly unfolded before them. A rare vantage, he realized immediately. It seemed young Caliya's Recollective Zenith was among the highest constructed points under Sil's carefully-designed Celestiodrome. Divayth stood eye-level with some of the peaks of the cliffs across the Radius, and from here they revealed the seam where brass bands and mechanics of the clockwork sky met the basin's rock.

To the left, Sil's Fortress gleamed in the setting sunlight, spires and pipeworks and massive bridges suspended by great rings positively dripping with noble resplendence. The city's thick walls remained sturdy and polished, untested by siege, yet ever-ready to defend the populace within. Divayth often wondered what the mer was preparing for with such impressive fortifications. Surely they were no mere ornament. But who would be fool enough to assault a sorcerer of such power in the heart of his own domain?

He laid a hand on the railing as he came abreast of his company. Sil's divinity clung to the brass, refusing to be parted by his power. Protective, the wizard realized. Despite exposure to what few elements Clockwork had, the outer walkway remained unweathered. This place had been blessed by the mer, consecrated by his power a long time ago. Something about it was quite sacred to Sotha Sil.

Or perhaps something about its singular resident.

"Exodromals struggle to understand the concept of determinism," Ms. Derynval began softly, tracing the fluted designwork of the bannister as well. She beheld the landscape below like a queen surveying her domain. "You find it distasteful. The idea that none of your choices matter."

The wizard drummed the claw-tips of his gloves against the metal. If this was some self-delivered eulogy she was hoping to give, he wasn't going to be held captive by it. "And let me guess," he interrupted. "You'll tell me it's good."

Affronted disgust met his challenging gaze. "Don't call me simple, Lord Fyr," she mocked, all reverence vanished from her voice. "Trifling as this must be to you, I have just discovered that my entire life has been crushed under the heel of a callous god. Forty years of misery, a soul force-fed through the sharp-toothed spokes of Seht's great machines. All this time, I thought the Apostles were architects of my oppression, not Sotha Sil himself. I say this not to justify the mer whose mechanical fingers caged my potential more surely than any misfortune, but to share with you a perhaps novel concept. That nothing I choose is incorrect." Her grip tightened on the notebook. "Every decision I make, from here on, was foreseen. The last of my life is no longer mine to ruin. There is a peace to that. A confidence. In case you were wondering why I resisted befriending you before." She scowled down at the title. "But far be it from me to attempt such conversation with so busy and important a gentleman. You're here for fabricants, of course." She flipped open the book, scanning her own handwritten notes. "And fabricants you shall have. Ask me your questions." She paused on some topic he couldn't quite see. "I will endeavor to answer them fully."

## Chapter End Notes

Had to rewrite this one about three times, the first two from Caliya's perspective. It was a struggle to get all of her emotions happening on the page, so I chatted with a good friend about it and realized I didn't need to! Divayth can just react to her being a stubborn angry bitch. :D

And at least she's a stubborn angry bitch at someone other than him, for once.



# Smoke and Freedom

## Chapter Summary

Freed from the shackles of an uncertain fate, Caliya calms down and opens up to Divayth over a conversation that takes them into nightfall.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Divayth was...a good listener. Or maybe a good student. Whatever he was, and as badly as Caliya had treated him all evening, he was still a gracious guest.

They sat on the balcony on chairs he had summoned from her storage as she read her works to him, as per his request. The rest of her stack balanced nearby on a small octagonal table, divided into two piles of what they had and hadn't yet finished. None of it took particularly long -- none of it was complete yet -- but the discussions they had over her work and her interests brought them well into sundown together.

It hurt, a little. To finally find someone other than Sotha Sil who cared. Having the ear of a god was nice, of course -- or at least it had been, until today -- but Caliya had always known that explaining things to a living god was a bit like she imagined a child explaining the world to a parent. Of course Lord Seht knew already. By sitting with her and hearing her speak and reading her work, he had always known what she would one day say and write. His patience was born of love and necessity, not curiosity.

Or so he'd led her to believe.

But Divayth was different. He was different in a way that Caliya couldn't have anticipated. His queries were not carefully-worded oral examinations meant to extract precise answers from her. They were soft and winding. Organic. Part commentary, part musing, part genuine interest. Never before in her life had she just...sat and talked, without feeling judged or defensive. No Apostle had ever cared much for her presence, let alone her conversation. She had always been 'that Tarnished runt' to the most vocal of them, and the rest simply followed suit. And any of the lower castes who might have treated her well didn't care about how fabricants worked. Not in the way she did. They didn't care about Seht's world like she did. They were all just trying to get by.

It didn't take long for her to calm down. Especially with Divayth distracting her so well. It was strange at first, the role-reversal they had played now that she was the one so willing to converse and he reluctant to waste further time. But he had not taken much convincing to stay, either. After all, he still had his undercroft problem, and its solution was wrapped up in her head. Forty years of neatly-packaged information at his beckon call.

And, as night waxed, the conversation turned to Tamriel. By now she had accepted that there was little point in resisting his more personal inquiries further, and so she conceded defeat and spoke about herself.

Yes, those guidebooks on her shelves were more gifts from Lord Seht. Some had, admittedly, been stolen from dead adventurers, but most were personal requests, granted with grace and generosity. Divine apologies, she had once suspected, for the difficulties she had experienced in the Basilica. Now, however, in light of the living god's confession, she was not so sure why he had tormented her so. Why would he offer her tastes of a world she would never touch?

Yes, of course she still wanted to visit. Just one day, that would be enough.

"Enough?" Divayth repeated softly over a pipe of something that filled the air with an exquisite, exotic spice. "You presume a single day is enough to see all that the continent has to offer? My life



spans eras and still I find pockets of surprise tucked away nearly anywhere I care to look."

The wizard regaled her with tales of Nirn Above, describing the beauty of a world she longed for. Food that tasted of something other than wet chalk, a diversity of wildlife that would steal her breath, every corner of the planet teeming with life and power. Great towers grown of mushrooms and bosmer who sang trees into houses. Endless deserts full of catfolk. Snowy mountains that touched the clouds. He summoned some of her guidebooks and flipped through them for illustrations, sharing stories of adventure and discovery. A charming little tavern here, a skilled alchemist squirreled away there. Guilds and politics. People and places. And she drank it all in, heartache and wonder squeezing her chest, yet all of it feeding a bitter, poisonous seed deep within. All of this majesty Seht had denied her. A life she could have had.

At the end of it all they sat together and watched the Celestiodrome turn, gazing up in mutual quiet at the false stars and artifice moons as they crossed the great clockwork sky.

"I will speak with Sil," Divayth announced suddenly, lowering his pipe to a knee. "He may be finished with you, my dear, but I am far from it. And nor do I endorse this deterministic view of the world." The wizard fixed her with a stare that nearly glowed in the shadows. "You may call yourself a 'superfluous cog' in whatever machine metaphor you people are so fond of, but Tamriel asks nothing like this of you. Nirn demands no purpose, nor expects fulfillment of any useful task." A wry smile twisted his lips. "Azura knows how few among the populace ever accomplish anything of note, anyway. You will know freedom."

He really refused to understand, didn't he? Caliya watched lights twinkle on and off in the distant fortress through the balusters of the balcony's railing. Aromatic smoke shrouded her senses most pleasantly. He had offered to share the pipe with her and she had accepted, but a single chest-searing breath had been enough to shy her from more. If she was to die, it would not be from coughing over strange drugs imported by a strange wizard, and she would not hear more about it.

And nor would she hear more of his condescending snickers at her inexperience with such.

"A kind offer muthsera," she began, "and far be it from me to stop you. But I know it won't do you any good, and I would counsel a mer like you against wasting your time."

"I am afraid I will take no counsel from you," Divayth replied with quiet amusement. "You see, unlike yourself and the rest of this world Sil rules, I do as I please. And I will hear what it is that he insists is so important about your demise."

Caliya's smile thinned. "I wouldn't worry too much about that. I'm sure you'll be here to witness it."

"According to you, I might cause it," the wizard countered without malice or hostility.

"You are the most likely threat," she agreed. A more genuine laugh escaped with her next exhale, and she pushed herself out of the chair to cross the balcony and lean out over the railing. "It's almost poetic, that my final night would end up so pleasant. Just my twisted luck." The Radius sprawled below, dark as pitch. "You have my thanks for a nice evening, Lord Fyr. It has been a joy. One of the few in my life."

Her skin tingled strangely. She imagined for a moment there was a great sea down there, black and endless. A real ocean, of salt-water and brine, not a river of machine waste like the Effluvium. She listened as Divayth rose to join her, his dark armor tinkling like coins. The mer drew close, closer than he had all evening. Dark power enveloped the air, chasing away all of Seht's divinity save for that which clung to the banister. Her shoulder brushed the smooth plate encasing his chest. The earthy tang of his pipe smoke thickened.

Sharp claws traced the line of her jaw.

"You could be beautiful, you know." His voice was quiet. Nearly a whisper. As though all of Clockwork was listening, and he didn't want them to hear. "I could take you home. Clean you up."

Wouldn't that be nice. Caliya smiled at the thought, allowing herself a moment of weakness to imagine it. A breath of Morrowind. A taste of the land her ancestors called theirs.

"A bath would be nice," she admitted, watching what seemed to be an electric scuffle between a factotum and a fabricant far below. Fish, they could have been, elsewhere. In Nirn Above. "I could use--"

A bath.

The realization struck like a slap to the face.

The water in her tank.

Gallons and gallons of pristine water.

"Hm?" The wizard leaned closer, searching her expression. She turned to him, flinched at how near he was, backed away a step, and drew a breath. White rage gripped her.

"I'll never get to use the water you gave me," she hissed, anger and horror forcing tears into her eyes. "That son of a guar-faced s'wit of a god--"

Her palm pressed itself to her mouth nearly of its own accord. The other followed, covering insolent lips. There was no need for that sort of crudity in company like this.

Divayth's baffled frown widened to delighted shock. A broad smile split his face. His hand encircled her wrist, peeling away at least one of her arms.

"No no, let's hear it, Ms. Derynval," he invited with a laugh. "Share your opinions of the mer, please."

"Stop it," she warned him, blinking away the mist and forcing back her furor. "This isn't funny. It hurts, alright? It cuts deeply. You don't know what that water meant to me."

"Oh, I think I do," he argued. "I haven't forgotten that repulsive fluid I nearly watched you ingest."

"Then just leave it alone." She pulled out of his grasp and turned away to draw a steadying breath. "I'm sorry, alright? It's upsetting."

All that water she'd been so excited to have. All of the things she could have done with it. Drinking, cleaning, bathing. Refilling steam pistons and clearing pipes.

The scholar could feel Divayth looming over her. His power weighed her down, heavy and warm and close. Her gaze fixed itself on the dizzying cliffside drop as she waited for him to say something.

She knew he would.

She could practically sense that he wanted to.

And she thought she was ready to counter it.

"...Do you know," he began in a voice unexpectedly gentle, "that I had always intended to take you with me?"

She half-faced him with a dubious scowl.

He met her doubt unflinchingly. "Sil promised a specialist. He claimed you were a mage of some practical skill. I did not ask of him a mere consultation. I requested an assistant."

"Sorry for your loss, then, muthsera," she fired back.

He shook his head. "No. I have not yet conceded this fight."

"Then you can duke it out with a god on your own time."

Divayth gathered his posture and touched the end of his pipe to his lower lip.

"As I intend to, Ms. Derynval. And you will be there."

The wizard puffed and awaited her response. When she didn't have one, gray clouds plumed between them. Once more, his conviction fissured her confidence. Stoic determination, pinning her in place. The edges of the world fuzzed around her smoke-addled senses. If anyone could convince Sotha Sil to change his course, who better than a mer like Divayth Fyr, after all?

She caught herself inhaling the heady spice with a slow, deep breath. It was so different, so alien. So unlike anything she had experienced. He offered the pipe again with an inviting smirk, but she shook her head and turned away. Back to the railing. Back to the beautiful view of her beautiful little cage.

The day was done.

What more was left?

But she didn't want him to go.

If he did, she would die alone. They'd all find her tomorrow, lifeless among the aftermath of some catastrophic accident. Some neglected maintenance, finally failing at exactly the wrong time. And surely he didn't intend to find Seht right now and speak with him. The hour was late. Very

late. Surely Divayth would be retiring soon.

Did he even sleep?

Did Lord Seht sleep?

It was growing difficult to follow her own thoughts. Whatever was in that pipe of his teased her mind, muddled her perception. She pressed her fingertips to her sinuses, running golden power along the ridges of her cheekbones, clearing her head with restorative power.

Much better.

Divayth upended and tapped the wood against the railing. Red embers and white ash fluttered away into the darkness. With a soft flash, it was gone from his hand. He, too, was finished, it seemed.

She couldn't let him go.

"You like demonstrations," Caliya opened, searching the Radius. She had one tool left. One final instrument of her own destiny. If she was to end it here, it would be on her own terms.

Divayth regarded her quietly, then followed her gaze out into that inky chasm. "I have enjoyed yours thus far. What did you have in mind?"

The scholar wet her lips, hunting. Seeking. There. Southeast. Not far from the glittering reflections of the Elegiac Replication. If she squinted, she could just make out a pack of fresh nix hound fabricants birthed from a crevice in the cliff.

Her fate was her own. All of the pieces were in place. She could make no wrong choices. Any decision she made now was the will of Seht incarnate.

"Lord Seht claimed I was a mage of practical skill?" she asked, stepping back and looking up at Divayth. His curiosity seemed intense, focused. Hungry. Like he was drinking her in. Like he too wanted to stay. Perhaps an effect of his drugs.

"Why don't we go for a walk, muthsera?" she invited. "I'll show you what I could have done for you."

## Chapter End Notes

Thus begins the first of many failed attempts by Divayth "You were promised to me by a so-called god" Fyr to make a move on Caliya "I wouldn't know an attempt at flirting if it kissed me on the lips" Derynval. I hope you're ready for some ridiculous slow burn shenanigans between a hawkish master wizard and this brave little field mouse while they work together through this little clockwork problem of his...

# Remnants of a Living God

## Chapter Summary

Not content to die at home, Caliya takes Divayth out into the Radius to go out with a bang, revealing more and more curious layers of her life and vast magical skill to the master wizard.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

No armor? No problem. Caliya's old Apostle brasswear had long since broken beyond further repair, and she wasn't about to make Divayth wait for her to change into the piecemeal protection she usually donned for forays into the wastes. The scraps she scavenged from corpses or retrofitted from conquered factotums tended to slow her down more so than assist anyway, and she wasn't out here to hunt and capture.

She was here to kill.

The journey was quicker than she'd planned for. The scholar usually took the better part of an hour to climb down the cliffs and make her way to the Caverns of Parturition, but after explaining her plan to Divayth and pointing out her destination from the balcony with a quick Light spell, he had brought them both from the observatory to the Radius in seconds.

It was so quick, she almost regretted not closing the Zenith's glass. But that would be Seht's problem soon. Not hers.

She was done.

His Recall faded gently from her skin, slipping away with an almost tender care. Caliya tried not to think too hard about it. She offered a quick thanks and looked around to get her bearings, tucking away the disappointment that she would never be able to study or even ask about Divayth's power. Contrasting the master wizard's heavy aurbic strength with Lord Seht's shining grace would have kept her busy for months with the right series of attunement forks. But that was not her lot in life.

And she had no time for regret anymore.

"This way," she invited, leading them off toward the cliffs. "The Assembly General releases the new batches of fabricants at night, for continuity's sake."

"Continuity?" Divayth asked, keeping astride of her.

"Of nature." The scholar smirked as she reached the rock face and felt along it slowly, tracing edges and crevices with expert care. The seams were harder to find at night, but not impossible. She tossed three orbs of soft light into the air around her, aiding the search. "I suppose Lord Seht worries that if people see thirty-six new kagouti fabricants all march out of a solid stone wall in a single line in the middle of the day, it will break the illusion."

The wizard gave a dismissive exhale over her shoulder. "Break the illusion, hm? Yes, because nothing else around here would tip you off that this place isn't natural."

Caliya's smirk widened. "What do you mean, Lord Fyr?" she asked innocently, pleased that he'd taken the bait. "I've been told this place is a perfect copy of Nirn Above. And I should stop worrying about trying to leave."

"Ah, yes. The distinctions are subtle, and mostly cosmetic, I assure you. You haven't missed a thing."

"I thought so."

A bittersweet happiness curled around her chest. His sarcasm matched her tastes so well. It was

truly unfair, how little time she had left.

“Here we are,” she half-added to herself as she found the locks. Two diagonal slits buried among natural cracks and fissures. She pressed her nails to them as she turned away, and was promptly greeted again by Divayth, watching from barely a hand’s breadth away. She met the mer’s studious curiosity with a flat stare and touched his chest plate to push him back.

“Do you mind?” she asked, likewise tunneling her power through his. “I need something from home.”

As he stepped away she focused and cast her Sight back across the Radius to the observatory storage rooms, searching for the keys she would need to unlock the Caverns. Shelves of clockwork refuse greeted her, but she knew where she’d left them among the mess. A set of three small, segmented rods, tucked away in an unassuming box near the floor, hidden in plain sight. They fell into her palm as she retrieved them and turned back to the rock, pinching the longer two between her first and second knuckles.

Divayth closed in quickly when she returned to herself.

“Psijic projection?” the wizard asked with nearly predatory excitement. “And where did you learn a trick like that in this oversized dust bowl?”

“It isn’t full projection, and I think you can guess who,” she clarified, trying not to be too pleased by his approval. She’d never gotten the hang of the complete process, and nor had she ever needed it. Was he always this quick to impress, though? Somehow she’d been under the impression that *nothing* caught the eye of Divayth Fyr for positive reasons, and yet he’d become so receptive to her in a very short time. How long did that tingling smoke of his last?

And, moreover, since when did *she* start to care about the opinions of Seht’s friends?

“The same mer who taught me to extract memories from stars, and who left *these* little gifts behind when I moved into the observatory...”

She slid the keys into the slots in the rock, and channeled Lord Seht’s divinity through them to fool the enchantments. The living god’s bright power fizzed through her nerves, overtaking her arm up to the shoulder and guiding her through the motions. The third key sank into a separate square that opened only after the first two had been accepted. Once all three were connected, searing grace clambered through her veins, demanding a creator’s authentication. She fed it more of Lord Seht’s ambient power, and waited for squeezing arcane claws to release their grip on her heart.

Divayth was, unexpectedly, concerned.

“Ms. Derynval?”

“It’s fine,” she insisted, enduring the pain with a grin. “You should have seen me figuring this out the first time, Lord Fyr. I was so sure I was going to die.”

“This still seems quite the possibility,” he muttered.

Caliya laughed to herself, levity countering the biting ache. It scrabbled up her spine, through her skull, into her eyes. Blinding light occluded her vision, glowing even through closed eyelids. She wielded divinity like a ward, layering a god’s veneer over her own soul. “What an inglorious way that would be to go,” she managed though bared teeth. “My final act, granting you access to the Caverns of Parturition.”

Although it did thread an icy needle through her mind. He was right, it wasn’t exactly without risk--

A grunt escaped her throat as the stolen credentials were accepted. Aurbic gear-teeth unclenched themselves from her lungs. With the familiar clatter of hidden machinery, darkness claimed the rock to her left, dissolving solid stone and revealing the yawning cavern’s entrance.

Empty, for now.

But probably not for long.

Caliya slid the keys free and rested her hot forehead against the cool cliff face, catching her breath and waiting for feeling to return to her numb ribcage. She smirked down at the segmented rods in her palm and passed them to Divayth, to keep him busy while he waited for her to recover. They rose from her hand and she forced herself upright to watch him examine them closely. Pins

and needles assailed her heaving chest.

"I've encountered these somewhere..." the wizard realized aloud, looking from them to her and back.

"On the end of Lord Seht's arms, I'd wager," she revealed with another grin. "They're spare fingers."

Her company's right eyebrow nearly disappeared into his hairline. "I beg your pardon? You have, in your possession, pieces of Sil's own hands?"

"Obsolete versions. Among other things, muthsera," she replied, winking. "You think I just learned to manipulate divinity by thinking really hard about it?" The scholar collected the index, middle, and thumb from the air above Divayth's palm with a shaking hand as she started off toward the caverns, bringing her globes of light with her. She was still winded, but convalescence could be done on the road. "Although I confess," she added, "it's a skill Lord Seht never wanted me to share."

She pointed the living god's index finger at her company as they crossed the tunnel's threshold, pulling his attention back as the enchantment resealed itself behind them. "Remember when I said I know he approves of my fabricant work because he brings me more notebooks from Nirn when I do?"

Divayth raised his hand as though to claim a second look at the mechanical digit. "I seem to recall a brief mention of this subject."

"I used to write about my findings with the pieces of himself he left behind, too." She pocketed them before he could take one. "And he did *not* particularly approve of that."

The cave took a sharp turn to their left, and began a gentle, downward slope. A few brass pipes striated the natural rock.

"Is that so?" the wizard asked flatly. "Do tell, did he fail to gift you as many notebooks? Were you locked in a notebook-based trade agreement with the mer?"

His ridicule amused her.

"Not only that. He also stole everything I've ever written about him."

"...Did he?"

There was something deeply satisfying about the way Divayth's attention shifted between superficial mockery and intense scrutiny. Caliya struggled to hide her smirk.

"I suppose there are some secrets the Father of Mysteries intends to keep."

"Or Sil means to leave your breadcrumbs for another," the wizard mused.

It was an offhand remark, but her amusement guttered out immediately. He could be right. She'd never considered that possibility. The toys Lord Seht had abandoned for her to convert into interesting data could very well have just been laying the foundational girders for some future successor. A new generation. Perhaps another outsider led astray just as she was, cast into artificial hardship to build on a wholly unrelated aspect of her younger life.

"Could you recreate these works?" Divayth asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

"With what time, muthsera?" A blade's edge crept into her words. "And no. There were calculations on those pages that are no longer in my head. Information and experimental observations that can't be reconstructed. I destroyed plenty of Lord Seht's leftovers in the process of discovery, ensuring that when he took my writings from me, he took the only records I could ever craft. I can never establish those conditions again."

Not without more of his cast-off scraps.

The pipeworks grew denser and a few reinforcing panels studded the tunnel as they forged their way deeper underground. It bothered her more than she expected it to, the realization that she might be even *less* important than she'd thought. Not only was her life worth nothing and her accomplishment without noteworthy fame -- her entire legacy might merely be a forcibly incomplete stepping-stone for someone else. Just one more broken-toothed gear in a great machine of divinely-guided misery.

"Perhaps you could record what you *do* recall--"

She stopped him with an outstretched arm as the distant, omnipresent mechanical tinkling of

Clockwork changed pitch and rhythm. Something was coming. Something that would provide a more than adequate outlet for her growing ire. A heavy, repetitive one-two march.

Kagouti, by the sound of it.

“Hurry,” she urged, quickening her pace. “The caverns widen ahead, and I’d prefer to fight in less cramped conditions. And no,” she added as Divayth followed, “I can’t simply write down what I had from memory alone, even assuming I had the time to. Baseless claims unsupported by fact and finding are more than merely useless, Lord Fyr. They’re dangerous. I would never strip myself of credibility like that.”

“Come now,” the wizard urged, “I didn’t suggest you *publish* them.”

They followed the caverns around another downturn. The walls began to fall away into the darkness. Brass grating replaced the natural rock underfoot.

Caliya slowed to a stop, then took a few steps forward to separate herself from Divayth and prepare. “You want my discoveries for yourself, muthsera?” she teased, glancing back as she gathered her power. Her glowing orbs brightened and spread out across the space.

The wizard folded his arms. Amusement glittered in his eyes. “I am certain I’d find something of worth in them.”

Wry entertainment colored her tone. “I’m beginning to see now why Lord Seht wants me dead.”

“All the more reason to preserve you, my dear.”

Relentless, wasn’t he?

She was spared from more treacherous topics by the growing volume of the kagouti march. Their numbers were impossible to tell by sound alone, but she was fairly confident in an estimate of under fifteen by relative volume. New fabricants were released in lockstep, and their Capricious Modules only activated after they reached the Radius.

Or, in rare cases, when they encountered an obstacle prematurely.

The beasts marched out of the darkness as one, needing no light to obey their base directives. Twelve immaculate machines, still gleaming with birth-oils from their fabrication capsules. Beautiful, deadly fusions of nature and artifice. Perfect specimens, untouched by time or climate. Any one of them would have been a jewel in her collection.

A cursory glance told Caliya no significant design iterations had been implemented to this group. That in itself was a slight relief, but also a source of curiosity. It had been quite a while since Lord Seht approved of even a minor update for any of his wildlife. Had the Assembly General run out of ideas?

“...Shall I assume that you require no assistance?” Divayth probed evenly.

Sparks crackled around the scholar’s hands. Two steps forward brought her easily within striking distance of the queue’s lead fabricant, yet kept her out of its module activation range. A bolt flashed through the air with a snapping bark, illuminating the rock as it struck true to the beast’s left eye. Caliya drove her power deep into its clockwork brain. The fabricant stuttered and fell with unimpressive ease, its mighty forecrest containing what otherwise would have been an impressive explosion of gears and glass to mirror Divayth’s own back in her specimen chamber.

“I think that’s a safe bet,” she agreed with a smirk.

The rest of the pack bumped its corpse and each other in a quick chain reaction, then began to bellow and snort as they “awoke” from their basic directive. Chaotic instinct overtook programming.

The scholar prepared to do to Seht’s creations what she would have loved to do to their creator.

## Chapter End Notes

Anyone else miss Morrowind's excellent translocation spells? Mark and Recall, Levitate, ALMSIVI and Divine Interventions...? \*Wistful sigh\* Fast Travel ruined us,

my friends. Bring back creative solutions that only accomplished mages get to use while the rest of us simpletons sit in boats or bump along on the backs of giant bugs...

...or fail them in panic as a cliff racer pecks out our eyeballs...



# Theory, Applied

## Chapter Summary

Divayth and Caliya progress deeper into the Caverns of Parturition, offering the scholar chances to demonstrate the practical applications of her lessons back at the orbervatory.

A bit of Psijic mysticism. A bit of *divinity*, of all things. A thorough grasp of alteration. At least the basics of restoration. And a solid elemental foundation. Ms. Derynval was quite the accomplished young mage. Of course, Divayth would expect no less from a true student of Sil, rare as they were these days. It was almost a shame, the sort of arcane understanding the mer refused to share freely with the world. How much more the Dunmeri people could advance themselves with consistent teachings if he just left this little pet project of his more often, and didn't wrap his lectures up in riddle and metaphor like his insufferable Tribunal co-kings.

The wizard watched the scholar make short work of her foes, striking bolt after bolt into the beasts, deflecting their attempts to destroy her and reducing Sil's durable clockwork creations to mere wind-up toys. She would do very well facing off against the hordes overspilling his tower's undercroft, that much was readily apparent. Of particular note was her skill at spell absorption, a talent she'd failed to advertise until the spine-flinching moment he watched her take an electric blast directly to the heart, only to divert it down her arm and rebound it back onto its caster in a single, graceful arc.

A dangerous game, that sort of tactic. She liked to play with fire, didn't she? A woman after his own heart.

He wondered how often she'd been burned.

An errant bolt of lightning fizzled by Divayth's ear and sank into the brassworks behind him, its discharge raising fine hairs on the back of his neck. Her attention snapped backwards a few seconds after, as though only now remembering that she didn't fight alone. Far too late to stop the damage it might have caused if it struck true, of course. He met her alarm with a smirk and a disappointed tut-tut, but doubted she heard anything over the cacophonous bellow of another fabricant and the crackle of power it aimed at her. The creature's missile was forced into the grate between them. She took its caster down with a quick counter. This was the demonstration of a mage who excelled at her craft, that was clear. Despite her slip-ups she made an art of spellcasting rarely seen outside tenured old academics hoping to impress their female colleagues. Or, Mephala forbid, *pupils*.

Not that Divayth had any right to cast the first stone.

As the battle raged on it seemed to take its toll on the woman. The last fabricant fell in a sloppy showing of missed strikes, but the wizard withheld his most cutting commentary. Though Ms. Derynval wore a brave face, he could sense how much of her power had been gouged away by Sil's security devices and the fascinating process she had undertaken to deceive them. She herself wasn't meant to be here, much less with a guest, and this rebellious disobedience was not without its price. He could only imagine her crispness of form at full strength. Even more so if he could feed her a decent meal or three and provide her something softer to rest on than cut brass for an evening.

She deserved at least this.

"Not my greatest," the scholar admitted, dusting her hands off as she studied her work and panted. "I rushed the lock a bit. Outside, I mean. Guess it...wore me down a little more than I

expected."

"Yes. It shows," Divayth agreed, crossing to join her. He picked his way among the broken machines, studying her accuracy and how it had wavered as the battle wore on. Aurbic echoes of her spells curled pleasingly through the air, displacing Sil's stifling omnipresence, at least for a time.

"Kind of you to agree, muthsera," Ms. Derynval replied with biting cheer. She started off deeper into the cavern as he met her, surrounding them both with her arcane torches. The walls narrowed quickly back into a tunnel as they progressed.

The wizard regarded her with a wry smirk. "Would you rather I lied to you?" he asked. "Or perhaps you expect me to soothe a bruised ego. Reassure you that your weakness is not of concern. Promise that your foes will be gentle and understanding."

"I get it, I get it," she told him, raising a tired palm. "Are you alright, by the way? Did that one bolt hit you?"

"Concerned for my well being?" the wizard continued to tease. "Touching. I was not injured in your fracas, and nor would I have been had the assault found its mark. It takes a bit more than a handful of escaped sparks to remove a mer like myself from this plane of existence, I should hope. At least you noticed your mistake, unlike plenty of other negligent adventurers I've had the displeasure of working alongside..."

The scholar drew a breath and rolled out her shoulders, straightening her posture.

"What a luxury. Negligence would have killed me a long time ago."

"I have no doubt, given your circumstances," Divayth agreed. Dark humor colored his words. "Instead, you made it all the way to the date of your proper, anointed death. Well done."

She shot him a flat stare, but it was too drained to have much bite. "That's cruel, you know."

"Am I truly the one you should be accusing of cruelty?" he countered.

It pulled a tired laugh and a sigh from her, but she shook her head and offered no reply.

They walked along in silence as he gave her time to recover. His thoughts drifted back to those fingers Sil had left her, and the memory, and all of the other puzzle pieces the living god had scattered throughout this scholar's strange life. What was he, Divayth, to make of them? Assuming he *did* humor the mer and take Sil's word as inevitable prophecy, what solution was he expected to cobble together from the death of a recluse and the trove of curios she seemed about to leave behind?

He knew for certain what he *was* going to do, if everything came to pass as predicted. When they were done here, if Divayth left this place unaccompanied, the wizard was planning to plunder that fetid mansion like an Evergloom crow, and he knew Sil knew him well enough to expect this. His curiosity would not be slaked by writings alone, knowing that fingers and toes and memory-extractors and Mora-knows what else awaited the adventurous and determined. Sil's wards be damned, he'd remove entire doors if they stood between him and discovery. Perhaps that was the mer's plan. Perhaps Sil would even meet him there, and he could pry the answers he sought from that mysterious mechanical skull while he was at it -- by wit, or by force, if necessary. Were this all to happen as Ms. Derynval assumed, he *would* teach Sil not to trifle with him like this.

By the time she slowed them again, the walls were more artifice than geology. He wondered how much further to their destination.

"Nix hounds, I think," the scholar announced arbitrarily, turning her head to...listen? Was she *hearing* something above the distant clangor of Sil's tireless machinery? "They're easy to take down."

"Shall I expect a more impressive showing, then?"

Ms. Derynval searched his face with something approaching a desire for challenge. "Are mer like you even capable of being impressed?"

Divayth issued the clarion call with an unflinching interest. "Make the attempt and I shall judge accordingly."

The way her eyes lingered on his as she turned away set an unexpected rhythm to his pulse. Was she holding back? How much more could the woman give? She was far from full capacity, and yet

her confidence suggested there was more to be seen. He almost regretted that pipe; he wouldn't have smoked it if he knew she had these further plans for their evening. He didn't quite trust himself to do more harm than good should she truly require assistance. Not in cramped quarters like this.

Ms. Derynval made no predictions for an appropriate battle arena with the Nix Hound fabricants like she had with the kagouti, but the cavern had been widening for a while after taking another turn deeper into the bowels of the city. Back toward the fortress now, if Divayth's sense of direction was keen. She bade him stop with a gesture as the battle formation marched out of the darkness in three columns, and he watched her assess the opposition and gather her power.

An icy wind whipped up around the cavern, not unlike her demonstration in the specimen hall. Wintry chill teathed at Divayth's exposed skin and ruffled his hair. He watched frost crystallize on pipes and spread like a spider's web through the brasswork floor around her, pluming with every step as she approached her opponents. The wizard himself retreated toward the nearer wall, seeking an appropriate angle to view the show, and raised a few more shining orbs around them.

He expected a gale.

Instead, she tossed a volley of ice chips. They plinked ineffectually off the foreplates of the first three bugs, but their purpose quickly made itself apparent.

Like the kagouti, these fresh fabricants only appeared to notice an obstacle when it interacted with them. The swarm's leaders stopped dead in their tracks, rippling a wave of stasis through the rest as they all nudged one another and came to a stop.

A brief calm before the storm.

With an audible wind-up of gears they leapt every which way, propelling themselves in seemingly random directions. Most ended up attached to the walls or ceiling and immediately readjusted their trajectory, but a few aimed directly at Ms. Derynval with their first attempts, slamming headfirst into a sheet of ice she formed from the aurbis. It didn't stop them, but it did seem to knock them senseless for a moment, long enough for their allies to begin a second assault.

Begin, but not complete.

Howling wind roared through the tunnel, sinking deep fangs of arcane cold through the joints of Divayth's armor down to his very bones. He folded his arms in excited expectation. Crystalline snow spiralled through the air, sparkling in white streaks and making visible the currents Ms. Derynval had summoned and now controlled.

She held them back, arms outstretched, feet lifting from the ground, waiting for something. Tornadic forces assailed her back and shoulders, whipping through her robe, coating her skin with glittering crystal. The protective sheet before her cracked and crumbled, great chunks of ice tumbling along the corridor and forcing nix hounds to avoid them or be swept away. Divayth studied the scene closely, seeking that trigger, searching for the event that she awaited.

He missed it. Whatever it was, a handful of the pests leapt through the heavy drafts toward her and she unleashed the storm, freezing them midflight. The blizzard swept the caverns like a dragon's sigh, instantaneously transforming the clockwork brass into a frostbite spider's nest. It was over before it had begun. All of the ticking, clicking machinery fell silent, encased in great spikes of ice protruding sharply from every direction.

Ms. Derynval's Light spells guttered out, leaving only Divayth's as she herself returned to the ground and promptly staggered to a nearby wall. Her robes and skin fastened themselves to the frozen pipes. Breath plumed from her parted lips into the cold air, heavy and quick. The wizard shattered the creeping freeze around his own boots and flash melted his arms apart, crossing to aid her as she spoke.

"Well that was a mistake." She sank to an unsteady crouch and panted. As he knelt beside her she blinked up at him and offered a slaughterfish grin. "Guess I figured out...how I'm going to die."

He reached toward her shoulder to assess her health and offer what assistance he could.

"Enough theatrics, Ms. Derynval, I won't--"

"Run."

The word came out so rushed and breathy that he wasn't certain he'd heard her. Her hand caught

his wrist in a tight grip, all humor gone. She forced herself off the wall and nearly fell onto him in her urgency.

"Run," the scholar repeated more clearly and forcibly. "Did you forget what happens when they get cold? When the ice sublimates, they're going to explode." Her eyes darted wildly around her work. "And quite possibly take this cavern with them."

# Dark Gifts

## Chapter Summary

Faced with the consequences of Caliya's folly, Divayth takes charge for a bit.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There were worse ways to go. At least it would be quick. If the shards didn't strike vitals, the subsequent collapse would surely crush her. Quick and clean. A neat end to a messy life.

Caliya wasn't worried about Divayth, either. He had to be able to take care of himself, right? And he had time. Not much, by the sound of those thrumming cracks. But enough to get away.

Why, then, wasn't he?

"Are you *deaf*, muthsera?"

She tried to shove him through burning muscles but it was like budging a boulder. He was solid and unyielding, a stone-cut statue of himself as he knelt beside her and watched the brumal time bomb tick. She scowled at his unexpected weight, reminded of the moment she tried to push his hand away from the Zenith's door. There was a mismatched inertia to his body that didn't fit his movements or his visual appearance. Was it the heft of his armor? Or the density of his shadow?

"I *can't*...protect you, Lord Fyr, I don't--"

A spell of Silence cut her voice, cast without a flinch. Divayth's eyes narrowed, but they didn't leave the tunnel. Deeper cracks and the squealing of crystal on crystal assaulted their ears.

"Enough, you're becoming a distraction," the wizard murmured, resting an elbow on his leg. Power gathered and wove through his fingers as they drummed the air. Aurbic currents rasped against her raw soul like splintered metal. "You've proven your skill with magic, and you've reminded me of our danger in a timely manner. Do not doubt my own abilities."

Caliya panted. *He* was going to protect them? What was he going to do, single-handedly hold up meters of rock? For how long? She couldn't walk in this state. She could barely stand. There would be no escape if he didn't move and leave her here, *now*.

A noiseless cough seized her chest, painful and wet. More wracked her throat like shards of glass and she dropped to all fours to clear her lungs. Blood spattered the cold metal, freezing into ruby jewels.

Divayth exhaled audibly, his gaze flickering briefly to the mess. "Do try to cling on a *bit* longer," he hissed. "You've picked an inopportune moment for a medical emergency. You'll be *fine*."

Still under the effects of his Silence, she could only nod and wave him off with a trembling arm. She did in fact agree with his thoroughly considered diagnosis, despite the growing crimson pool beneath her and her inability to say so. She had squeezed herself dry on plenty of other occasions and pulled through. But none of them had happened this close to a catastrophe about to begin.

And begin it did.

The great cleave broke free a stalactite and dropped it to the ground, setting off a chain reaction as it shattered. Tinkling crashes ricocheted down the cavern, sweeping a shockwave of noise and violence toward the crouching elves. Still coughing, Caliya tucked her head and braced, awaiting death or salvation.

This was it. She could do no more.

Divayth's power unfolded like an awakening beast, surrounding them both and sealing the cave. Thousands of dull, thudding impacts pounded above her as the scholar coughed and coughed. His

light spells crowded in close, gleaming against the melting mess and the rivulets it formed. She didn't have the strength to heal. Her ribs were studded with knives, every breath cutting soft tissue within.

The assault quieted from a percussive cacophony to a low, lengthy hiss.

"Hmph."

Caliya looked up and almost physically flinched. An opaque wall of ice shards and metal shrapnel greeted her, hovering in perfect stasis, embedded into a thick, ghostly aurbic ward close enough to touch. Divayth's sightless gaze darted around for a moment longer before he nodded to himself. Thousands of failed attempts to kill them dropped with a deafening crash and scattered across the floor.

Beyond, the cavern was in ruins. Reinforcement panels laid where they had fallen, some rocking gently around impressive dents. Thick structural beams torn apart by the assault sagged in useless triangles. Steam poured from some of the split piping, billowing wet clouds into the air with a metallic tang that set off another round of sharp, hacking coughs. Others dripped fresh and used oil in black and gold trails into rivers around the edges of the grated floor. And coating everything were the remains of the nix hound fabricants -- brass and bone, flesh and glass, carapace and cogs, scattered and mostly inert. A few recognizable legs still ticked and twitched. One reasonably-intact thorax scrabbled listlessly at the rock. But the devastation was fairly complete.

However...the cavern had not completely collapsed. In fact, the rock surrounding the brass seemed relatively undamaged, though the clouding steam quickly obscured a more thorough study.

Divayth's dark laughter cut through the hush.

"A spectacle worthy of the journey, Ms Derynval." He encircled her upper arm with a gentle grip. "Come now. On your feet. Let's get you somewhere a bit more stable for a proper analysis."

Caliya looked from the destruction to him and back, then down at the pile of death he had averted with powerful ease. A hollow nod helped her summon what little strength she was already recovering and, with his help, force herself upright. Everything burned. Her chest was on fire. But getting away from the mess was a priority. They retreated from the aftermath together, steady and patient, until the hissing steam blended into the rest of clockwork's steady rhythms.

She was grateful for his stability, but couldn't he have been encased in something a little more comfortable than steel and spikes? She might as well have been "assisted" by a factotum. And she couldn't even lodge a complaint, not with his Silence spell still in effect. When they were far enough she tried to sit and breathe but Divayth wouldn't let her, taking hold of her shoulders and all but hoisting her against the wall.

"Hold still..." he urged softly, catching her chin and raising her face to his. "Keep your legs beneath you, and do try to refrain from coughing on me a moment..."

She closed her mouth and swallowed down something unpleasant, then worked on controlling her painful breath. His lip curled in amused disgust. A second hand joined the first, cupping her cheek in his warm glove. Divayth's power surrounded her, pinning her to the brass, shrinking the world to just the two of them. She struggled to look at anything but him, well aware that she was a mess. Even more than usual. From this close he could no doubt examine every detail. She ran a dry tongue along her lips and tasted more blood. His eyes flickered down to it briefly and his smirk widened, quickening her heartbeat.

What was he doing? Her body ached with exertion, but he wasn't healing her. Did he know how to heal? Did a magus like him even bother with the restorative arts?

"You *would* recover on your own," he decided softly, taking her face in both hands. "But why don't we speed things up a bit, Ms. Derynval? You've mastered Sil's power so well. Perhaps you would like a taste of mine..."

Heat flushed through her skin at his words. Spots danced at the edges of her vision. She drove them away with willpower alone as clawed gauntlets trailed down her neck and a shiver ran the length of her spine.

"What are you doing?" she managed, more interested in discovering that his Silence had finally worn off than a verbal reply. She was certain she was about to find out either way, considering she

was in no position to resist.

"Shhhhh..."

A glimmer of light sparked deep in his eyes. Magic spilled from his fingertips, seeping into her skin, warm and alluring. Soft and dark. It shrouded her chest and flowed through her veins, sinking into her bones. Quenching her wrung-dry soul. Seeking to soothe. She accepted it without thought, drinking him in, deep and slow and inevitable. Her back pressed inescapably against solid rock. Her hands curled around the pipes at her hips. His steady, seeking gaze entranced her, captivating with crimson promise.

Just as she had cloaked herself in Seht's divine grace, Divayth submerged her essence in his own, diffusing his aurbic shadow through hers. He was gentle, just as his spells were. Careful. Unrelenting. Indulgent, somehow. Traces of strange smoke and seductive strength clouded her senses, clearing the pain from her lungs and easing the strain in her muscles. She could feel herself relax into his touch, almost against her will.

What a rush.

The scholar struggled to find words. Struggled for experiences that came close. There was something unutterable to Divayth's presence. Something that slipped past any guard long before she could raise it. Unraveled any ward she might have thrown against it. Something that wrapped her in its web and bade her surrender, something falsely trustworthy but enthralling all the same.

Was this...Daedric power? Was this what Lord Seht rebuked so sharply?

A quiet laugh escaped the wizard's chest when he was finished with her. His gloves slipped from Caliya's neck and followed her arms, catching her wrists and raising her hands. Black dust sloughed like smog from her gooseflesh skin. His grip tightened gently as he watched and shook his head.

"Prove to me that you can retain it," he urged softly, releasing her right hand to caress her left. "You're letting it slip away."

What was it? She took hold of his gift and drew it close, gathering his strength and claiming it as her own. There was a comfort to it. An organic sort of intimacy missing from Seht's cold, impersonal grace. It unsettled her, how much she wanted it.

How easy it was to wield.

"...A fine showing."

She raised her eyes to his dark approval. "Azura would be most pleased. Or perhaps Boethiah could be your patron, with a quick and fearless temper like that..."

More of his friends. The Apostles had blocked all mention of the Daedra from Caliya's life, denied her information and censured her curiosity as a child. Chastened her against such heresy. Divayth's unflinching nonchalance in mentioning them time and time again felt improper. Wrong, somehow. Immoral. But this exotic power of his that beckoned from within bade her to reconsider. There was no right or wrong in knowledge and strength. Morality was defined by the mer who wielded it.

And she was expected to wield it now.

She cleared her lungs and refreshed her body, utilizing this comforting chaos within her. Lifted blood from her skin, her hands, her clothes. Seared it to ash. His power seemed eager to be used. Quick and responsive. Natural, but only pretending to be. There was a lie to it, she realized. A deception. She had the distinct impression that if she let it, it would take her over and consume her from within.

A lesser mer might succumb. She closed her eyes and breathed, and longed to sit with and examine this fascinating thing Divayth had gifted her. But there was no time.

"You've gone quiet," the wizard remarked. "Speak, Ms. Derynval. How is my strength treating you?"

"Well," she replied, looking up at him with sheer confidence. "Very well. Thank you, muthsera."

It was in her mind. In her heart. Building its nest in a new home. Threading its way through her desires. Twisting her to its ends.

She was almost inclined to let it.

Caliya turned to the mechanical bedlam she had made of the caverns, ready to end this delay and forge onward. Divayth, however, seemed less confident.

"You have nothing more to say?" There was clear disappointment in the wizard's tone. "Come now, for such a prolific writer you must have more words on those lips..." He released her hand and traced her cheek with distracting fingertips, but she caught his wrist and drew his touch from her skin with a smirk. She was fine. Still alive. Not dead, and not done here, after all. There was more to do. More to be seen. No need for further analysis. And she wanted to *use* this darkness thickening her veins, not stand around talking about it.

"What would you like to hear, muthsera?" she teased, laying a palm against his shoulder as he seemed to lean closer. "Give me a few foes and an hour alone with it, and I'll write you a speculative essay." She slipped free of his proximity with a self-assurance she didn't quite own and started off, glancing back only when he remained where he stood.

Divayth's expression was unreadable. But her heart was too busy racing with promise and adventure to be slowed. Surely he must be as impatient as she felt to test her new mettle.

"Come, Lord Fyr," she invited, reaching out with a smirk. "I'm sure you'd love to see me put this generous endowment to good use?"

A distinctly caustic frown narrowed his eyes.

"Yes," the mer agreed sourly, crossing to join her.

She eyed him curiously as they approached the cloud-soaked debris together. The ice had already dissolved, so she brushed aside the broken fabricants in their way with a sweep of her arm. Incredible, how easy it was. She had never felt so rested, and yet Divayth remained gloomy beside her. He was practically sulking.

"What's the matter?" she asked slyly, wondering if he was somehow disappointed in her acumen. "Did you expect me to take longer to learn your great and magnificent power? Did you think it would be more difficult to master your abilities than Lord Seht's?"

He met her gaze through billowing steam. As it enveloped them, the temperature quickly rose to dangerous levels. She condensed it to filmy water and peeled it from her skin before it could burn, trusting Divayth to do the same.

"Shall I continue to suffer your arrogance, or should I warn you that Daedric power has been known to corrupt the weak and innocent, Ms. Derynval?" the wizard mused with pointed volume, excessive even over the hissing pipes. "I suppose I oughtn't be surprised that you'd take to it like a fish to water, rebellious as you are. But if you're imprudent, by the time it's done with you, there won't be a Caliya left to recover."

Oh, so *this* was how she might die.

How wonderful.

She might have preferred to be crushed by rock.

"So this *is* Daedric," the scholar replied, raising a hand to watch black and red currents spiral around her fingertips. It was beautiful. And dangerous, exactly as she suspected. But it seemed submissive to her will. Another deception?

"Of a sort," the wizard agreed. "I *have* tamed it for you. Pure Daedric power would have overtaken your senses immediately."

Would it? This was just a taste?

"I suppose I ought to thank you a second time, then," she teased. "I'll make sure my essay is thorough." They passed her handiwork and resumed the caverns proper. Streams of oil flowed underfoot, racing them down into the bowels of the city. Lord Seht would not be pleased.

Good.

"Perhaps if you weren't so quick to continue this little sojourn, an opportunity for gratitude might have presented itself," Divayth muttered.

...An opportunity for what?

"Pity I have mere hours left to live," Caliya replied with a wink. "We haven't time to waste on such expressions."

Whatever he meant.



Something about the comment drew a briefly shocked and daunting scowl from the mer. He glowered at the darkness as they followed the path, and the longer the silence stretched, the less comfortable she became. What was upsetting him so? She had thanked him; did he want her to kneel before his grand and mighty generosity and kiss his boot? He'd known her for hours now; she'd demonstrated quite clearly from the very beginning that she was not the deferential type. She would not be conquered. She would not be held hostage by charity. And she was not struck speechless by his mere presence. She'd made the mer read a fetching book while she ate dinner! Or perhaps he was still bothered by her insistence that she was about to die. Did he really think he could save her from fate itself? He was a legendary arcane master, but nothing could turn Lord Seht's hand from its course.

Reminding herself of this muted her excitement. At least she would have a few moments with this aurbic toy from Divayth, but, like the water in her provisions chamber, it would never be put to its fullest use.

A bitter shame, that was.

The quiet, unfortunately, carried them all the way to their destination. Caliya's dismayed sigh turned Divayth's head as they rounded the final bend.

"What now?" he demanded.

"I was hoping to test your power against more opponents," she admitted, "but we're here."

"Here?" The wizard looked ahead to a faint glow at the end of the short corridor.

Caliya nodded. "The Halls of Fabrication."

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was originally going to be MUCH longer, but stopping it here is fine enough. It felt like I was covering too much (as you'll see later), and expanding the last thousand or so words into its own chapter will make everything feel less rushed. Plus, getting all of this to feel right was...surprisingly exhausting.

Divayth is now, of course, 0 and 2 when Trying To Put The Moves On Caliya, and Cali is now 2 for 2 on Having No Idea Why He's Keeps Standing So Damn Close.

# Dark Defiance

## Chapter Summary

Caliya intends to take Divayth through the layers of the Halls of Fabrication, but things go sideways rather quickly when she attempts to use his power in Sil's restricted domain.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Perhaps Divayth ought to write down what he was going to lecture his good friend Sotha Sil on the next time they held audience. The list seemed to lengthen by the minute, and he was beginning to worry that he might forget some of his gripes. A game, this must be to the unfathomable artificer. Introduce his prurient peer to a clever, interesting, and knowledgeable young woman... who lacked any interest in him whatsoever.

And then announce she would die before dawn's light.

Truly, he didn't think the inscrutable divinity capable of practical jokes of this magnitude.

The caverns opened into a flight of stairs that led down to an enormous, unlit hollow full, as everywhere else, of headache-inducing clinks and clanks and clunks. It was so unexpectedly expansive that the far walls disappeared beyond the circumference of Divayth's Light. The wizard brightened his orbs to learn the dimensions of the enclosure as Ms. Derynval led the way toward a distant suggestion of hulking machinery, but the scholar slipped her power through his and extinguished it, plunging them both into darkness.

"Not the best idea, muthsera." The soft hush of her voice floated through shadow, just barely perceptible over the mechanical symphony. "We're not welcome visitors here, remember? Best not to draw attention."

Divayth wasn't sure what irritated him more -- her ability to manipulate his power so quickly, or her utter inability to appreciate her own skill. She wasn't a shy or modest woman by any means; she simply took her mastery for granted. Typically he found such things a positive trait in his choice of company.

But not when he himself was failing to impress.

"Better to use a Night-Eye spell here," the scholar added. "Security factotums will be attracted to anything that isn't their own power, or Lord Seht's."

"Is that not the point?" Divayth asked, decisively rekindling his spells and guarding them from her intrusion.

Ms. Derynval twisted away from the harsh shine to cover her eyes. He might have pitied her pain a mere few minutes past.

"I didn't bring you down here to disrupt these processes, Lord Fyr," she replied sharply. "We are allowed to destroy Lord Seht's fabricants. Not the facilities that create them, nor the factotums that maintain the machines. The Incarnatoriums are delicate places."

A lapdog to the end. What happened to her rebellious streak?

As she recovered her sight the scholar worked at his spells, seeking to snuff their glow a second time. He resisted her influence but admired her industry, curiosity getting the better of him as he allowed her to work. She treated this stalemate like a puzzle, probing for weakness and measuring reaction. Aware of -- but far from deterred by -- his superiority.

The wizard started off toward the distant manufactory without her. "Then why was I brought here, if not for a bit of revenge against your precious god?"

He could certainly use some mischief. As stress relief against Sil. *Turnabout is fair play, old friend.*

She caught up quickly. "Revenge? I'm angry with Lord Seht, but I certainly don't want his hand to be the one to take my life. You asked me to teach you about your foes. I've taught you how to destroy them. I thought you might enjoy a rare look at how they're crafted." She lifted an arm to slough more of his power from her skin and observe it. It obscured her fingers in living shadow. "Like I said, I was hoping for more resistance, but we can't go around *making* trouble. We should avoid the factotums, muthsera."

A waste of time, then. Very good. Divayth was in no mood to learn the gory details of what went into creating Sil's clockwork pestilence. He was satisfied with knowing the manner in which to destroy them. But he continued to follow his appointed lecturer. Perhaps another opportunity of interest would present itself to him before the night concluded.

Blocky forests of metal glinted as the light of the wizard's magic revealed them. A vast gridwork of brass cubes broke the space into narrow columns and imperius rows, bifurcated by an airy, central walkway. Crowning each of these towering behemoths appeared to be a single specimen tank, suspended from and supported by struts and fed by Sil's ever-present pipeworks. These large brass and glass globes were not unlike those that housed Ms. Derynval's supplementary rations, Divayth realized, albeit spotless and somewhat more refined in appearance and ornament than the scholar's own. A scattered few were empty but most held a single fabricant -- over half a dozen varieties at least, from a cursory glance. They glowed as the only other, meager source of light here, shot through with delicate geometric channels of power even as they slumbered in fluid baths.

Among their bases, a handful of Sil's brainless drones stomped about, patrolling and performing their routines of maintenance and inspection. Despite Ms. Derynval's caution, none of them seemed to have noticed their guests just yet.

"With so little time left to live, what do the consequences of your actions matter?" the wizard asked, eyeing their potential targets. Surely the brass god wouldn't miss a few of his precious tin children. Didn't he have enough to spare, after all? The mer could always tinker a few more together.

Ms. Derynval scowled. "So because I've upset you, you're going to act like a petulant child about this?"

Divayth glowered indignantly, mood thoroughly snuffed. "Courageous words from a woman who believes herself on the brink of death."

"Is that another threat? I'm not afraid of you, Lord Fyr," the scholar fired back, taking him by the elbow and guiding him toward the right-hand set of machinery. "You could have let me die in the caverns, after all. You're not going to kill me now." She offered a pointed glance. "I thought you wanted to see me use this power of yours, anyway."

Her brief touch softened his ire. "Precisely that. All the more reason to stir up some conflict." "Not here."

The wizard squeezed his teeth. So stubborn and single-minded. No wonder Sil adored her. No wonder he left pieces of himself for her. Divine love notes to a cherished mortal pet. Perhaps it was good she was to die, after all. Her unfulfilled promise wouldn't haunt his dreams.

Ms. Derynval led them into the clockwork jungle, adopting a rogue's creep and muffling her steps. She surrounded his own boots with the same. He had half a mind to dispel her influence, but Mephala forbid she accuse him of further asperity. He did not, however, adjust his own stance to match hers. Divayth Fyr would not be seen shedding his dignity to skulk about the shadows like some troublemaking youth.

"... You know, I almost liked you," he commented idly, watching her trace lithe fingers along the metalwork she kept close to.

The scholar promptly hushed him. "You can join the rest of Clockwork in dismissing my worth, then," she scathed quietly. "I live alone for a reason."

She would die alone, too, if she kept up that sharpness. The woman spread his power along the

floor, seeping magic through the gratework into a wide circle around them. A Detection aura formed of it, though the wizard wondered if she could sense anything so near to himself.

And he was right, it seemed. The scholar exhaled as she peered around a machine. "Must you be so...large?" she hissed, looking him up and down.

Well he couldn't rightly let that opportunity slip by.

"You refer, of course, to my aurbic shadow."

She regarded him flatly. "What else, muthsera?"

He smirked and folded his arms. "What else about me is large? A few things come to mind, in fact. Well, one in particular. I'd've been happy to show you later, if only--"

"CONTAMINATION DETECTED. INITIATING TRIANGULATION."

Ms. Derynval swore, dissolved her aura, and snuffed Divayth's lights a second time, leaving him literally and metaphorically in the dark about how she'd done so. Her hand found his wrist as the gravelly voice of an alerted factotum repeated, and others began to echo its grating alarm. He invoked a Night Eye to see her, painting the world in cobalt blue. She tugged at his arm and glowered but he held his ground, resisting her with ease.

"Come on," she hissed, stepping closer to whisper in his ear. She felt around his shoulder and neck as if she herself had forgotten her own suggestion and was seeking him in near pitch darkness. A welcome bit of intimacy, for once. "Move! If three of them find us they'll determine our coordinates, call for more backup, and this whole place will swarm with Clockwork soldiers."

He caught her waist, smirking down at her nearness. "Stay and fight, then." He trailed the backs of his fingers down her cheek. She flinched away. He didn't let go. "Explore your gift, Ms. Derynval. Demonstrate your mastery."

Her gaze flickered over his shoulder as she finally remembered to call her own Night Eye.

"Let go."

"Fight them."

He wasn't backing down this time, and she seemed to figure that out.

"Fine! I'll break a few, while we're finding someplace safe." She pulled his arm from her face. "Deal?"

Deal. Divayth released his captive and followed her as she retreated, fully intending to hold her to her promise. She required no further convincing, however. As brass sentinels abandoned their posts to join the hunt she struck them down, lashing out with twin whipcracks of darkness. One sliced a clean diagonal through the sheer metal of their chests -- hip to shoulder -- and another crossed their perforated "mouths." A symphony of precise violence. Vivec himself might have been given pause by the grace of her "art." Four were felled in this manner, and then two more, somewhat uncreative in execution but quite efficient in silencing their opposition from a distance.

Divayth expected Ms. Derynval to lead him back toward the caverns, but instead she turned down avenues away from their exit. Deeper into the hall. The scholar darted energetically from intersection to intersection to peer around corners and destroy a fresh foe or motion him closer, but the wizard contented himself with a brisk stride to keep up. He wasn't the sort to sneak, and he wasn't the sort to run about and make an unseemly mess of himself and his armor.

His companion seemed quite content to make enough of an unseemly mess of herself for the both of them.

As they neared the far wall, it revealed itself to be an enormous control panel of some sort. Thousands of dials, gauges, and interactables spanned the great brass face. Ms. Derynval lifted the skirts of her apostolic robes and left her boots behind as she dashed free of the crowding machinery and crossed a measure of unguarded space. Without breaking stride, the woman leapt up and began to climb the sheer metal, fingers and toes adhering to the surface as though she were crafted of lodestone. Surefooted as a Bosmer in a tree.

"You *can't* be serious," Divayth called as he followed after and watched her scale the structure.

"Just hold on a second," she yelled back. "I have to reset the system!"

Of course she knew how to do that. Was Sil training an apprentice, or a replacement?

Thankfully, none of the factotums seemed to realize they'd come this way. The wizard scanned

the fabrication forest and harrumphed as they marched through its trunks, hopelessly lost and bellowing panic at one another in the darkness.

Useless things.

At least Argonians could be trained.

A spark of divinity raised his eyes back to his nimble companion. She was halfway to the vaulted ceiling by now, and appeared to be fiddling around in some rectangular drawer she'd extracted, spilling magic in a dusty glow over its edges. The wizard frowned. She better not waste the power he'd gifted her correcting this little mistake she'd made. He wasn't in any mood to offer more.

Harsh light spilled from her skin and ruffled her clothing. A wave of angular lines spread along thin seams in the brass plates, then faded just as quickly. With it, the clockwork chaos subsided. As factotums calmed from their hysteria and returned to their quiet labors, Ms. Derynval fitted the cube back into its housing and clambered down the wall. She dropped the last few meters and landed rather heavily for a woman of her delicate stature.

Her shoulders rose and fell as she searched for and retrieved her footwear. Divayth followed disapprovingly. She looked up at him and smoothed flyaways from her forehead.

"Apparently the tour's out of the question," she announced. "I'm sorry for that..." She waved a hand back at the fabrication forest "...Mess."

"You're winded."

The woman appeared to take offense to that. "And?"

And she would need yet *another* recovery period.

"I didn't grant you my power to waste on errors of judgment."

A scowl lined her face. "I don't recall stipulations, muthsera. And besides, I didn't waste it." She closed her eyes, bowed her head, and pressed a palm to her own chest. Green light peeked between skin and fabric. A fatigue restorative spell. "I'm *winded* because I just scaled a sheer cliff. Do I look like I'm in any shape to do that?"

She most certainly didn't, and to her credit she raised her eyes to him with steady breath and a significant repository of power remaining. But that was hardly a logical excuse, and he was feeling adversarial. "You're a field scholar who *lives* on a cliff, and you've admitted no knowledge of translocation spells."

"And?"

Divayth crossed his arms. "Should you not be accustomed to such exertion?"

Ms. Derynval raised an eyebrow. "Do any of the Apostles strike you as particularly muscular?" she countered. "Does anyone in Clockwork? Besides the Tarnished orks -- they don't count. You've seen what I eat, Lord Fyr. Our diet doesn't lend itself to a chiseled physique."

The wizard drummed his fingers restlessly. She wasn't wrong. They were all a scraggly bunch, despite the ostensibly complete nutrition in their tasteless excuse for 'food.' But he wasn't about to concede the point merely because she was correct.

"I'm sorry, by the way," the scholar added in a softened tone. She looked out over the gridwork they'd fled. "They don't usually react like that when I Detect them. I haven't had that sort of clumsy trouble since the first few times I came down here." She looked down at her hands, lifting his power from her skin. "It must be something about this magic manifested that triggers their alerts. They're probably sensitive to Daedric incursion, now that I think about it." She flashed him a smirk. "Obviously I've never had occasion to test this."

"Hmph."

He was about ready to move on, but his stubborn dismissal upset her quite suddenly. Ms. Derynval's attempt at mood-lightening promptly evaporated. Her hands curled into tense fists, and her face hardened to stone as she unleashed a fresh glare.

"Look, if you're going to keep being an inconsolably cantankerous old mer over whatever slipped your gears back in the caverns we can end this, Lord Fyr," she hissed. "I get it. I made a mistake. I upset your delicate sensibilities somehow, and you're not going to get over it. You don't *have* to stay and endure my caustic presence any longer, you know. I have nothing more to show

you.” She turned away, and flung a dismissive arm toward the rest of the room. “You know the long way home, and I’m sure you have plenty of shortcuts to get there, too. If we’re done here, be on your way. Take my books when you go. Good luck with your undercroft, muthsera.”

Her tirade came to an abrupt close. Divayth watched the limb fall to her side. She remained where she was. Waiting, perhaps, for him to depart.

Which he had no intention of doing.

Alone.

*“Unauthorized disassembly detected. Initiating search for cause.”*

One of Sil’s thickheaded mannequins appeared to have discovered their brief path of destruction through its brethren. Ms. Derynval’s head turned slightly. She caught the wizard’s eye once more, scowled, and cloaked herself in a Chameleon spell.

“I’m going back to the orbervatory,” her quavering outline announced. “See yourself out.”

He Dispelled her disguise before she’d taken three steps, drawing her to an annoyed halt.

“You’re coming with me,” the wizard informed her, closing the gap between them. She rounded on him, all dark elf fire and fury until her mind caught up with her rage and she realized what he meant.

The scholar’s teeth closed with an audible snap.

“I’m *what*?”

He raised a hand to her cheek. She intercepted it with her own. He closed his fingers around hers, instead. See? He could be an accommodating gentleman, once she was done dragging them about on her misadventures.

“Recall our discussion on your balcony, Ms. Derynval,” Divayth reminded her, “Sil promised an *assistant*. You are coming to Tel Fyr, you are leaving this grease-coated cage of artifice and divine entanglement, and Tamriel will have you once more.”

His revelation stunned the woman to silence.

Those widening Dunmeri eyes of hers were enchanting when astonished.

Perhaps he had been coming at this all wrong.

Perhaps there *was* a way to charm her.

“Moreover, I can lay the foundations for you to escape this prison on your own,” he added softly, “should you find yourself back here. Would you like to learn the very basics of transliminal passage?”

Sil’s protective wards were nothing like the boundaries that separated Mundus from Oblivion, but they would do to provide an adequate analogue, if she was quite done with her so-called home. A worthy -- and reasonably safe -- opponent for the scholar’s first attempts to defy not just her precious god, but nature itself.

She had certainly proven more than capable of interfering with and unraveling lesser magics, after all.

“...Okay.”

For once, no biting attitude colored the woman’s tone. No acerbic cynicism leached into that pretty voice.

No.

Not “for once.” Divayth studied Ms. Derynval’s sudden, quiet wonder. That hint of tremulous disbelief, tinted with desperate desire. She had adopted this very cadence before. When he had offered her water, fresh from the brooks of the Odai. And she had so quickly and wholeheartedly allowed him to provide it.

Quite thoughtlessly so.

Why hadn’t he seen this earlier? How could he have been so blind? So wrapped up in his own ego, that--Well, to his credit, Divayth Fyr did not typically find himself competing so directly with the Tribunal itself for the attentions of any individual member of the dunmeri race. By nature their mere proximity tended to put him off from those who reveled in the radiant glow of the so-called living gods.

*“Unexpected presence detected.”*

Impatient rage seized the wizard. The hapless factotum that had wandered too close exploded into a shower of ice and rock and cogs. His grip tightened on Ms. Derynval's hand as she flinched away despite the ward he invoked to protect them both.

"Not here," the scholar urged, backing away and tugging him with her. "To the corner. They won't search the edges."

Ah. Enthusiasm.

*Very well, my dear.* Divayth allowed himself to be led to the darkest depths of the Incarnatorium, far from the glow of the fabricants and the irritation of their guardians. When they reached the walls he discontinued his Night Eye, enveloping himself and his company in darkness. He would not need to see in a traditional sense to teach her, and the intimacy of instruction in the shadows...

...Well, it couldn't hurt.

He positioned himself beside her, and rested his palm atop her far shoulder. Her weight adjusted beneath his arm, but she did not pull away.

Opportunity favored the perseverant.

"This should be child's play for you, my dear," he began softly. "You know Sil's divinity well. It blankets this world with protection, guarding his creation like a jealous lover." His attention slipped to the aurbic, to observe her power more closely and guide it as needed. "Expand your awareness, Ms. Derynval. Seek the edge of his reach. Where power hardens to shield. Where this world seems to end. Where you can sense nothing beyond."

Her head tilted a few degrees backward, eyes lifting toward the ceiling and the false sky above. He would have chosen the much nearer sides of Sil's domain, but he would not fault her for obeying first instinct. With practice would come experience, after all.

A fine thread of power cast itself from the scholar, slipping through brass and stone high above as though neither existed. He attached himself to it, allowing her to carry his own presence out into the cool night air of the wasteland and parts beyond, to touch that glorified brass aviary Sil trapped his flock within. The wizard watched her poke about for a bit as though studying the movement of the great gears and brass bands of his Celestiodrome, and deciding where best to traverse them.

A wide, triangular gap seemed to win the day. Not far beyond, she reached the limits of the Clockwork City itself.

"Form a needle of your will," Divayth instructed gently, tightening his grip on her shoulder. Her nearness was intoxicating. "Thin and sharp. As thin and sharp as you can."

In a more traditional sense, when dealing with Oblivion, a ritual would assist in this endeavor. To form and shape one's magic, and stabilize the portal once opened. A novice in particular would be most aided by such algorithmic reinforcement.

But Ms. Derynval was no novice.

The tip of her power spiraled tightly around itself, squeezing into a lengthy, attenuated spine. Such fine control, from such a distance. She held it steady, awaiting his command.

"Split the ward, Caliya." Divayth pressed the tips of his gloves into her collar. "Drive your power through his. Demand your freedom from this prison, my dear. Unlock yourself from these shackles."

He expected no hesitation. Surely she must desire nothing greater than this. Surely this moment must be so meaningful for her. Decades of confinement, and the keys dangled before her eyes. Surely she was gathering her fortitude, shoring up her strength. Surely, she was...

A strange quaver thrummed through her essence. Her head tilted half a degree toward his own. Lowered. Shook, very slightly.

The scholar was losing her nerve.

"Don't falter!" Divayth hissed, seizing her power and melding it with his own. He drove their magic into Sil's opaque fog, burrowing deeply through thick, resistive divinity until they broke through.

Arcane feedback flooded the connection. Ms. Derynval gave a soft gasp. Her first taste of Tamriel. Life and nature, beauty and power, chaos and warmth. Things not sensed since she was a

mere girl at her mother's knee. He watched her in the dark, the barest hint of her face, her wide eyes. That joy and wonder of a new world, that breathless anticipation of the unknown he himself chased every time he stepped through a transdimensional gateway. Every time a plane untouched by mortal man or mer unfurled at his feet.

The wizard locked their power in place, forming a lattice of his own magic, allowing his student her first aurbic breath of Nirn. Of Mundus itself. He held Sil's stubborn divinity at bay to permit the shock to pass.

Oh, what he would have given to feel as she must feel now. He could hear her breath through parted lips. Her weight leaned into his side.

How does one capture a moment, and keep it forever?

Divayth kept his voice steady. Patient. Even.

"When you are ready, dilate the connection."

Resolve gripped the scholar once more. Without further direction she formed a ring of her magic -- his magic -- and widened it. Compelling a god's warding grace to yield to her Daedric-laced will.

Exquisite.

"Now, draw it near. Bring that space toward--"

The sky convulsed around them, squeezing her violently, shattering her strength and collapsing the breach she had formed. Shining judgment pulsed through the Incarnatorium, casting a blinding light to their left. The scholar pulled free of his grip in a flurry of activity, and they both turned to face none other than Sotha Sil as the living god crafted himself into being from a pocket of searing brilliance. As it faded the luminous mer regarded his trespassers with a steady, inimitable gaze.

...Just what they needed right now. Stellar timing, as always, old friend. Divayth tucked a burning ire back into his chest as he crossed his arms and that list of grievances unrolled itself in his mind. Interrupting his lesson added itself to the very top, in bold stroke and with several decisive underscores.

"And here I find you both," the time-untouched sorcerer began, approaching with his ever-graceful and revoltingly barefooted gait, mechanical arms tucked behind pristine white robes, "precisely where you must be. Tearing asunder my careful work." He regarded his precious Ms. Derynval with a critical sorrow, but unfathomable eyes shifted next to Divayth. He had the brazen audacity to offer a faint smile to the wizard. It was not returned. "Six-and-thirty years I have spent crafting an ideal apprentice, Divayth Fyr," Sil informed the mer. "And I send you to her, and you ruin her in four hours and fourteen minutes." He bent his brass-crested head in appreciative acknowledgement. "As you were always meant to do. How I covet your efficiency, my good friend."

## Chapter End Notes

Divayth was, of course, talking about his... "mushroom tower."



# The Last Day

## Chapter Summary

Sotha Sil sets into motion the final piece of his Apostle's destiny.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The day had come.

The death of a student, finally at hand.

*Am I ready?* Sotha Sil found himself contemplating.

As ready as Caliya Derynval was to die.

The sorcerer regarded his audience. Neither wizard nor scholar was pleased by his arrival.

Each would be even less so by the time he departed.

Divayth was to begin, stepping forward to address his rival for the second time that evening.

"*Sil.*" The sharpest tone with which the mer would ever speak his name. Accompanied by a characteristically irate frown. "Curious to see you here. I was under the impression when I left your presence earlier, it was because you were too busy to chat."

The accusation of deception was clear. But the sorcerer offered no reply.

The next words were not his to speak.

Caliya had gone ashen at the sight of her patron, but recovered quickly to a fiery snap of anger. Such carefully-cultivated rage, borne of long injustice and crowned by indifferent truth.

Sil watched events unfold with helpless pity for their necessity.

The scholar slammed a forearm into her company's chest, doing no damage to Divayth's cuirass but stopping his advance immediately. She stepped forth in his stead, demanding her place among great elven powers.

An ill-fated endeavor. An attempt performed much too early. Yet unearned.

The pain of her impetuous decision punished the scholar before she could make her stand. Caliya grimaced and glowered backward, rubbing her elbow as though her target was to blame for these consequences.

"*Must* you be so solid?" she spat.

False levity was a mistake she would not make again.

Indignation edged the wizard's stare with ice. He touched one clawed gauntlet to the base of her skull, tucked the other stiffly behind his back, and lowered his voice to a deadly hush. A plume of magic the color of rotting moss wafted through the air.

"I have tolerated enough of your antics in private," he informed her with soft venom. "You will not disrespect me in front of others."

The scholar did not reply, or react to his words at all.

Divayth's Paralysis, left unbroken, would not wear off for six hours.

Sil ached for her folly, desiring his student back. That bright, brilliant, fearless dunmeri woman he was compelled to lay out City-spanning puzzles for, and had delighted in watching her conquer over the years. That wide-eyed child stumbling about in his callous world of angles and artifice. And the sorcerer himself, gifted the privilege of being her only respite. He yearned for those days long past, in which he could stave off the heavy knowledge he faced in this moment. How he wished to continue politely ignoring the truth that she had never been his to keep.

No longer could he pretend. The hour had come at last. Fate was already carving cruel ribbons from everything he had crafted her to be, and it had been doing so for hours. Unravelling the very

cloth it had forced the sorcerer to weave. Disassembling his perfect machine.

And other such gentle metaphors.

The gears of time ticked through Sil's chest, crushing tenderer things caught in their insuppressible teeth. Unaware as always of the gravity of his actions, Divayth circled the statue he had made of the Apostle and folded his arms.

"A bold choice, old friend," he continued, silently daring Sil to dispute his discipline. The sorcerer did not. "Your mischief usually takes more subtle shades than this. I admit, you are given to misdirection when it suits you, but rarely to outright lies..."

The Clockwork God drew his arms behind himself and traced the brass fingertips of one hand with the other's. These words were his to speak.

"And what is it that I have lied to you about, Divayth?"

*More games? Really?* The answer echoed through his head, a wearying but necessary bridge to connect the present with the future.

Divayth scowled. "More games? Really? You told me she would make a suitable companion, did you not?"

He had. Sil regarded the motionless scholar, embroiled in a battle of wills.

"I have not deceived you."

*Come now.*

The mer harrumphed. "Come now. The woman is a knowledgeable enough artificer, but her behavior is wholly unsuitable. And furthermore, she believes I am to kill her before midnight. A notion you placed in her head. We found your little eidetic stage play with Luciana, you know. In that memory tower in her vile, empty excuse for a home."

Sil dipped his head in silent assent. Of course they had found it. As they must.

The wizard's eyes narrowed. "I *don't* appreciate practical jokes."

*You accuse me of lies, yet give flight to your own.* Divayth, like most, enjoyed any amusing levity that befell his rivals. Or his hapless students, when he took them on.

The sorcerer did not reply.

These next words were not his to speak.

A sheath of magic the color of rotting moss plumed from Caliya's skin. His student shivered as she successfully Dispelled her curse and backed away to avoid another. Divayth unleashed a dark glare that didn't quite fully eclipse his continued disbelief. One day, he would come to understand that no magic could stand long against her patient determination.

But not today.

She raised both palms placatingly.

"Peace, muthsera," the Apostle begged, still angry but now well aware of the arcane giants in whose company she stood. Another piece of Sil's heart slipped away as he watched her force restraint upon herself, resurrecting a corpse of obsequious behaviors not seen since she fled the Fortress.

His beloved beaten dog, stricken once more.

Divayth remained a merciless master. "Stand in silence then, and let the adults discuss important matters."

But Sil shook his head. This moment was not the wizard's to dictate.

"Divayth, you will find that she is, in fact, quite suited to your intentions," the sorcerer corrected. "Caliya will stand among us."

He lifted a hand toward his apprentice in vain. She would not take it, and indeed the mere gesture unsettled her. So different now, she had become. More pieces of her, piling at his feet. Like oil through a filter, draining of what it had once been. Accomplishments refined away. Purified. Prepared anew.

She was right to be afraid.

But wrong about why.

"Approach, Apostle," he beckoned. As she forced herself dutifully closer, the gears ticked once more, squeezing ever tighter. "The time has come to lead yourself to truth."

After they had rid themselves of their audience.

"She still thinks she's dying tonight, so you know," Divayth reminded him.

"And so she is."

*More riddles, Sil?*

The revelation faltered Caliya's gait. Scholar and wizard exchanged a sober glance.

*Don't you ever tire of this?*

Divayth glowered, resettling his crossed arms and tapping his claws against armor in quick, restive sequence. "*More riddles, Sil? Don't you ever tire of this?*"

*Every turn of the Axle exhausts, old friend,* the sorcerer longed to answer.

"Are you or are you not killing her tonight?" the wizard demanded.

It was Sil's turn to desire expedience.

"As surely as I did the day we met."

At his words Caliya froze, and would not approach again. Instead, Sil crossed the remaining distance to her, unblinking and inscrutable. She teetered on the razor's edge of fear and dread.

Her patron laid a brass hand on her shoulder to keep her near, but offered a brief reprieve from his scrutiny to continue addressing Divayth. The mer remained nonplussed about the theatrics he was witnessing.

"I must ask patience of you, my friend," Sil pleaded. "Perhaps you might enjoy a moment of candor with my work while I discuss with Caliya matters unrelated to your interest."

A moment of candor. The proposition caught the wizard off-guard. Suspicion tinged with an avarice for discovery gleamed in his eye. He knew what was being suggested, and he understood the rare price of such a transaction.

Too good to be true, in a sense.

The mer harrumphed performatively, casting a critical eye toward his future companion. She backed half a step away, leery of another arcane rebuke. Sil's tightening grip denied her further retreat. Whether or not Divayth noticed, his next words would offer no indication.

"A bit of privacy for you two, then? Are you certain, Sil?" the wizard challenged, as if the sorcerer was ever anything but. "Your apprentice has left me in a less-than-gentle mood. And I still expect an explanation for this wild-nix-chase you sent me on..."

Of course he did. But he would not have it. No wild-nix-chase had occurred.

The Father of Mysteries untucked and raised his free arm. Ambient light swelled, revealing the cavernous uppermost level of the Incarnatorium in all its noble structure. Divayth's sweeping gaze spanned the room, studying the full breadth of the nascent fabricant supervision network, then settled on the instrumentation console beside them. With narrow displeasure he turned, and waved a hand at the pair of mer.

"Very well. Collect me when your little father-daughter reunion is complete. I suppose I don't need to bear witness to whatever divine carnage you're about to inflict on your misbehaving devotee, then. Satisfying as I might have otherwise found it. I'll be -- What was it? -- 'tearing asunder more of your precious work,' old friend?" he called over one shoulder.

As much as he had studied these events, the fact that Divayth would so accurately describe his actions had caused Sil great consternation. But the sorcerer could find no indication to believe that something other than luck had placed those specific words in the wizard's mouth.

Divine carnage.

A description without peer.

Caliya watched him go. Sil could feel Divayth's power roil beneath her skin, undulating with upset and disquiet as Apostle and patron were left alone.

He studied his charge in the brief silence. Committing this sight to memory. The makings of another star in his Planisphere. The grease. The grime. The stained robes and unkempt hair. A weakened essence, overspilling with tenebrous might.

All had occurred as it must.

Not everything was to be despaired about their final meeting, however. This was the last time he would ever see his student so self-careless. So unmindful of her appearance. So stunted by

ostracization. It was the last day she would live in squalid solitude. The last day of suffering by her mentor's hand.

The last day for many things.

The gears ticked again, pinching the bruise. She was avoiding his gaze, but aware of its weight.

Sil cast a quieting bubble around them both, to prevent the wizard from eavesdropping.

"Share your opinion of Lord Fyr."

His student frowned at a request she did not expect to hear. She finally looked at him, sundering another piece from his heart. Ironic. Or, perhaps, appropriate. Her gaze was devoid of anything he had once loved her for. No wonder. No curiosity. No hope or happiness. Just hollow acceptance. He waited for her to finish deciding between whatever else she might have said in that moment and the answer she was destined to give.

"...I don't..." A brief exhale. "I liked him," she admitted with mechanical compliance. Deception or delay would serve no purpose. She knew too well the song her patron forced her to dance to by now. There was no longer a pleasure in learning the melody. No joy in keeping pace with a so-called god. Not when the music played their funeral dirge. "I thought he was supposed to kill me."

Sil lifted his gaze. Divayth peered at dials and gauges in silent contemplation before moving on, placing more distance between himself and them.

"He is not to be your end."

"You are."

She could see the pain she caused her teacher. He felt her soul withdraw from the mourning in his stare. Thirty-six years of raising a child to a woman, of cultivating a flower destined to wither.

He much preferred his intransient machines. Unfeeling gears. Unthinking cogs.

If only he could pull free from them.

"Why did you come to this place, Caliya?"

Another question she failed to anticipate.

"I was angry with you."

"You are still angry with me."

She tried to withdraw once more. He locked his brass joints, caging her shoulder where it was. Spite resurfaced, blooming from frustration.

"Wouldn't you be?" the scholar challenged.

He closed his eyes and inclined his head in quiet assent. Yes, he would be angry in her place. He was angry in his own place. Angry with his compelled orchestrations. Everything she felt reflected itself into his own heart, magnified.

And she did not yet know how thoroughly their connection would be riven.

An echoing clang swept the quiet Incarnatorium. Sil reopened his eyes. Divayth Fyr looked over from a massive brass panel he had successfully pried out of the wall thirty or so paces away, still trailing its flywheels and cogs and rune-covered attunement crystals, and raised his voice to cross the gap.

"I'm all right, thanks for asking!"

The wizard leered a brief challenge that neither god nor Apostle returned, and clambered into the hole.

The interruption served to snap the tension like a shredding gear-belt.

"Why can't you let me go with him?" Caliya begged. "I've done my duty, why must I die?! You repurpose broken things all the time, Lord Seht. Why can't I be sent off? What purpose does killing me serve?!"

*You repurpose broken things all the time.*

No he did not.

Sotha Sil did not repurpose obsolete machines.

He refabricated them. Broke them down, and forged them anew.

It was time to forge her anew.

Three paces put the sorcerer in front of his Apostle. Both hands caught her face, upturned her chin, silenced her protests. She gripped the struts and spindles of his forearms, careful to keep her fingers free of pinching articulation points at his wrist, but she could not dislodge his might. He channeled divinity through the brass, boiling Divayth's power out of her skin. Reminding her that even the wizard's borrowed magic could not match her patron's might. She hissed in pain and pulled away, teeth bared and eyes angry.

"What have I ever done to deserve this?!"

*Nothing*, he longed to answer. *You have done nothing to suffer such pain.*

And yet, it must be inflicted. She knew this, as well. These words were not the profound considerations of his student. They were the death-throes of the child within.

"Your nature, not your actions, determines what you must become," he heard himself reply.

*What is action but nature, manifest?*

The sorcerer could not stop the flinch of regret that crossed his eyes. A flinch she would see, and a flinch she recognized too well.

He didn't want to do this any more than she did.

The fight drained from her expression. Another piece, lost forever. Another withered petal fluttering to the ground. Another ribbon, carved from that which she could no longer be. There was no path for her but that which he guided her toward. And the less she struggled, the quicker it would be over.

His keys, his brass fingers, slipped free of her pocket. They caught her eye as they floated close. She paled very slightly at the sight of them.

"...You knew I've been using those." There was a petulance to her tone, as though daring him to punish her for breaking some unspoken rule.

"And you have learned them well," he praised instead.

Caliya returned her hands to his arms once more, though trepidatious of further pain.

"But they were never mine to have," she quoted softly. She was stalling, now. Desperation born of a false belief that extending the conversation would extend her life.

How he wished to indulge her.

Sil shook his head, and captured her left hand between his. Every move flinched her, as though this next gesture might be the one to stop her heart. He overlaid the brass joints of his keys upon her knuckles.

"Caliya...these have always been yours."

*And you will carry them with you for the remainder of your life.*

The scholar looked down at them. Looked up at him. Perplexed eyes searched his face for meaning.

Her patron squeezed her hand in his. Gentle. Perfect. Imprecise. He regarded those stained fingers with bittersweet warmth. Natural hands of Azura-cursed flesh. Hands he had guided away from replacement with clockwork mimicry, away from the acts of self-mutilating worship so many of her peers had performed. The fruits of her labors -- and Sil's own -- painted into her skin.

All in service to this very moment.

He wished to warn her. To step her patiently through the process she must endure. But he could not do this. No words of comfort were given to him.

He must be hated for what was to come.

The sorcerer thickened the walls of his Muffling ward. They opacified to a milky glow, and expanded in scope to accommodate the summoning of three surgical factotums to assist his endeavors. Caliya would recognize them immediately. Panic seized her senses, locking her in place, but not for long. She attempted retreat. He allowed her to slip free, but she could not escape his arcane barrier.

"Wh...at?" she whispered, looking from one to the next to the next. "You...You're just going to *chop me up?*!" Her voice had become shrill enough to break. Tears flooded her eyes. The wide horror in them broke her patron's heart.

But this must be done.

Her back struck his unyielding ward. A wide cylinder in shape, it afforded no escape as his factotums approached. Her magic worked to undo his, hysterical terror making a clumsy attempt of her effort. But she would not have the time to break free.

He would not allow her such.

"Concede, Apostle," he beckoned softly, advancing along with his soldiers. "Or shall I offer you a choice?"

Like a bolt of thunder, his words struck true. Of course she always had a choice. But she would never deny him, and she knew this well.

If he asked, she was always meant to agree.

If she were destined to refuse, the question would never have been raised.

She did not fight when the clockwork surgeons caught her. Nor did she move when Sil summoned his tools, or took her hand in his. She just stared, and trembled, and accepted her end.

The scholar made a valiant attempt of bitter stoicism, but she would have screamed as the scalpel parted her shaking flesh, had not Sil's Silence taken hold.

## Chapter End Notes

*\*Calmly flips table\** Well, every fic needs its weakest chapter, amirite? I've not updated this in almost a month because I've literally been struggling THAT long. I deeply apologize to everyone who's been waiting. But I can't keep endlessly masturbating my sentences trying to make something better happen anymore. I just want to move on.

*\*Takes breath\** Alright so you'll probably notice that Sil's quite a bit different from the ESO version of himself. That's because I realized, in studying Sil's dialogue in-game, that either he makes no sense as a character concept, OR he's just *\*acting\** in ways that...make no sense, as a character concept. It's part of what took me so long to write this, and why I'm giving up and just sending it out as is. I want to keep the plot moving, with apologies for his potential weakness in what's supposed to be a climactic scene.

I, personally, am fascinated by Sotha Sil's "Burden of Certainty" that he "Confesses" to the Vestige in ESO. The idea that he sees everything, birth to death -- its purpose, *\*his\** purpose, all events. And he's compelled to act in ways that further...some unspecified goal. I interpret this as though Sotha Sil is a self-aware sentience essentially trapped in the video game. He's watching a movie of his own life, one that he's seen thousands of times and memorized by heart. He knows what he must do, he knows what the responses to his actions will be, and he knows that he cannot deviate from his path. And yet, in ESO, particularly in the Summerset Arc, he says a lot of things that seem to suggest that he was either surprised by the PC's information for him, or caught unawares by events and developments around him. This...makes no sense to me, *\*unless\** he's acting or (I suspect) it's a game mechanic to keep him sounding all mysterious and profound when he "must think about this" and "must ponder that" while sending the PC off to do stuff.

And that leaves me with very little actual Sil characterization to work with, especially when I've built him a character like Caliya who already knows the compulsory determinism he's trapped within. He doesn't *\*have\** to act with her, and she knows that anything and everything he does is deliberately calculated to elicit a specific reaction and subsequent chain of events from those around him. Here, I envision him as that

tragic, imprisoned being and I tried my best to emulate that from his POV (and failed, sorry), and show how he would act around Caliya, who knows the truth, and Divayth, who strikes me as the type to be cynical about his claims.

I wrote and rewrote this chapter dozens of times. I just want to move the plot along and get back to the silliness of Divayth failing to impress Cali. So please forgive the weak writing, and hopefully we can get back to the fun. ^^

P.S. Also some of Sil's inner dialogue was inspired by "Sil's Last Words," a forum post that's been recreated all over the place --  
[https://en.uesp.net/wiki/General:Sotha\\_Sil%27s\\_Last\\_Words](https://en.uesp.net/wiki/General:Sotha_Sil%27s_Last_Words) (I hope links work here)

# Gift of the Tribunal

## Chapter Summary

Sent away from the action for a moment, Divayth Fyr returns to make a chilling discovery about Caliya's fate and Sil's intentions toward his own Apostle on "the last day."

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For a mer who had once waged a bitter war of eradication against the Dwemeri people, Sil had a grasp of tonal architecture that occasionally annoyed Divayth. The deeper he delved into the brass guts of this command panel, the more wonders the wizard found. Hundreds of crystal clusters routing and channeling fine measures of tremulous power through thousands of lively clockwork elements, all ticking and chiming and vibrating in perfect harmony or deliberate dissonance with their neighbors. Magnifying and attenuating signals. Minuscule gears turning great shafts with fine precision. Alloy and lattice oscillating over great distances. Oils and grease in thin channels and minute wells, resonant with the timbre of the aurbis.

Magnificent achievement. Envable, as well. And this was just one piece of his rival's entire world. Little wonder Sil kept it all behind lock and key.

A pity he was in no mood to appreciate it.

The wizard comforted himself with the belief that the sorcerer was a specialist, a narrow-focused thinker who had chosen ignorance of other fields in order to accomplish such great feats in this one. In contrast of course to Divayth himself, who took pride in the breadth of his knowledge and ability to teach some new tidbit to anyone who crossed his path. It was something of a lie and the dark elf knew it, but it *did* serve to inspire him to redouble his efforts on Tamriel.

And, now that he had a dedicated tower to ground and focus his endeavors, perhaps it was time to settle down and leave behind some storyable legacy. Perhaps the Telvanni's curious choice of welcome had provided him something even more useful than it seemed at first glance.

The prospect brought a smirk to the wizard's lips. He pried a crownlike crystal from the brass claws holding it in place and studied its structure in the light of a glowing orb. A number of its surrounding connections slowly faded to inert bricks. A passing fancy and nothing more, all these musings were. A brief moment of weakness to pass the time. While Tel Fyr certainly was a promising locale in which to centralize his itinerant lifestyle, he was simply not the sort to put down roots for long.

*Some mer lavish affection upon hearth and community. Others consider all planes of existence to be a form of home.*

Sil hid his accomplishments from the world, after all. Divayth expected to publish three more books by the year's end.

*Who truly leads their people to enlightenment, old friend? Who drags these ignorant masses from their darkness, kicking and screaming into the light of truth?*

Who reminds them of the virtues and purpose of the old ways, when the so-called Tribunal has been far too busy cutting a new and needlessly entangled self-serving "religion" out of whole cloth?

A wave of fatigue washed the shores of the wizard's thoughts. He wondered how much longer the esteemed Clockwork God and his truant Apostle would keep him here. There was much to do at the tower, and a fresh mind was demanded to accomplish his endeavors. Sleep beckoned ever more insistently with each passing minute. Divayth listened for voices, but he could still neither



hear nor sense anything of his company. Just that enormous divine block, squatting in space nearby. A sealed pocket realm unto itself.

Perhaps Sil *was* killing the girl.

Surely even murder wouldn't take this long, though.

*Perhaps you could use a few pointers on 'efficiency' after all, war-hero.*

Privacy be damned, Divayth picked his way out of the satisfying mess he'd made and peered back out into the spacious hollow. The sight of the great Godly Bubble drew his brow into a frown. What conversation could they possibly be having that required such obscurity? What really was Ms. Derynval's connection to Sotha Sil? All of this dramatic stagecraft must lead somewhere. As well as the sorcerer wore the finery of mystique about his persona, his strange actions did often serve some greater purpose, after all. The wizard had half a mind to suspect that Sil had planted this portal in his basement. One of his lengthy and inscrutable "plans" to bring them together once more.

Or perhaps it all merely *was* a foolish prank. One that master and student were both in on.

He tossed the etched gemstone over his shoulder and started closer, intending to knock on the door. The barrier unraveled before he had crossed half the distance to it, revealing more figures than the wizard had walked away from just a handful of minutes ago. Sil's drones, he realized as he neared. Three of the sorcerer's cretinous clockwork servants, performing some self-obscuring labor on...

On Ms. Derynval, it seemed.

The sorcerer himself turned, revealing a gruesome spatter of blood on his always-pristine robes. Surgical blades gleamed crimson in his mechanical hands. He wore a grim expression.

...Perhaps this wasn't a prank.

It was enough to cause a moment of hesitation. Divayth had never seen Sil so...blemished.

Not since his apotheosis, at least.

"You didn't earnestly kill her, did you?" the wizard called with a frown, crossing the remaining gap in four swift strides. "I was planning to emancipate the poor woman from this..."

He searched for a genteel way to describe the "life" Sil had apparently condemned his apprentice to, according to everything this evening had revealed to them. Sil, unhelpfully, didn't answer his question while his own lexicon failed him. But he did step away to allow Divayth the opportunity to see for himself just what necessitated such heavy concealment. The mer pushed aside one of the crowding factotums to reveal a severely wounded Caliya draped limply in the arms of another, face down on its stiff shoulder and unmoving. The first machine staggered and readjusted its position, then patiently returned to continue sponging along the back of her neck with some coarse excuse for clockwork "fabric."

"By Oblivion, Sil...what have you done?"

Lines of...of *something* were self-sealing with a faint aurbic glow throughout the gore coating the upper portions of her back and shoulders beneath sticky robes. Runes and rituals, blood-smudged and clearing too fast to read, left no scars of their prior presence.

He'd carved power into her like a damned necromancer preparing a corpse.

The scholar decreed herself still among the living by drawing a shuddering breath and struggling to lift her head. More of the same divinely-etched lesions were sealing themselves across her left cheek and brow.

*Grow. Mutability. Enduring.*

Glimpses of an ancient script, senseless among their rapidly disappearing context. Her eyes met his, then rose to Sil's. Unspeakable pain had left them swollen and wet. She attempted to pick herself up, but the thing supporting her did not release its prisoner.

Divayth peered closely at her injuries, then confronted the sorcerer responsible.

"What have you done to her, Sil?" he repeated, more stoutly now that shock had worn off.

Fluids burned themselves off medical tools, which vanished from the mer's hands.

"What I must," the sorcerer replied with irritating but unsurprising ambiguity. The rest of her blood seared itself from his hands, sleeve, robe, and sash, leaving the mer as pristine as ever. "The

pinnacle of her fortitude, made manifest. Your gift is complete, Divayth Fyr."

There was a cold edge to his tone. Uncharacteristic of such a pensieve mer. He was unusually unhappy with himself, despite the apparent success of...whatever he'd inflicted upon his Apostle.

His *gift*?

The wizard regarded the scholar with growing disquiet.

"This wasn't necessary."

"She is yours," Sil repeated, unperturbed by his disapproval. "The last day of her instruction is complete."

The last day?

"Oh, so she's graduated, has she?" If the sorcerer was going to keep being mysterious, Divayth would keep being unimpressed by it. It was too late in the evening to play these games any longer. "Congratulations on your achievement, my dear."

No smiles, of course. And he couldn't muster a smirk, either. Not many things needled their way under the skin of a dunmer like Divayth Fyr. He'd scried the depths of Coldharbour, strode the volcanic wastes of the Deadlands, and followed the threads of the Spiral Skein. He'd slipped between the Watchers of Apocrypha and trekked the Evergloom, and even made a fair go of Ashpit from time to time, when fancy struck. Of all the suffering he'd seen in the world, Ms. Derynval's current state was a mere drop in the bucket. And she was healing rapidly, which suggested that she would make a full recovery.

But despite some prevailing theories -- mostly from those who found him particularly abrasive -- that Divayth cared little for Mundus, the mer in fact took great pride in his heritage and legacy, as did all Dunmeri people worth their ash. He disliked seeing a worthy specimen of their race brought low. And, of course, no true gentleman could see a woman in pain without feeling *some* desire to alleviate her torment. This pitiable creature was having quite an eventful evening, after all -- seemingly caused by the wizard's arrival, yet through no direct fault of Divayth's.

The scholar made another brave attempt at freedom. This time, the factotum supporting her released its grip, allowing her to gather herself. Ms. Derynval wobbled slightly under her own power, but managed to stay upright. Divayth touched her elbow gently, seeking to assist in any manner available.

"...You know, traditionally, one wraps a gift in colorful paper," the wizard muttered, offering Sil another critical glare, "not its own fluids."

To his surprise, the scholar was the one to answer him. She blinked slowly, drew a breath, and looked down at her hands.

"Decorative ribbons are...a bit difficult to come by in the Fortress...muthsera."

She was exhausted again. No trace of Daedric power remained within her. All of it had been burned away, no doubt by her teacher's so-called "necessity," and replaced with what seemed to be divine struts supporting her still-recovering soul. A negligible loss of the wizard's own magic, but a bitter waste of opportunity for her. But of course. Sil simply couldn't tolerate any power that wasn't his own. The Tribunal probably forbade such invasive magic, for fear it might "corrupt" the saintly Velothi people. Or some such nonsense. Divayth traced their spindles down to her left arm, where a concentration of power still lingered at some unhealed wound.

Another gruesome discovery awaited him there.

Three of her fingers had been replaced with brass.

Index, middle, and thumb. A suspiciously perfect copy of Sil's own.

Suspiciously identical also to those discarded relics she'd wielded to bring them in here in the first place.

But smaller. To fit her hand, of course.

The damned sorcerer did love his miniatures, didn't he?

Her hand shook as she tried to raise and study them. Divayth supported her wrist with a delicate touch, and brought the mechanical digits closer to light. They were drenched in blood, along with what remained of her natural hand around them, making the precise merger of flesh and mechanics difficult to see. Fluids dripped to the grated floor, spattering into puddles still draining at

her feet.

The factotums withdrew and dispersed in soft flashes of light, no doubt to clean themselves off and find some other member of their creator's disciples to disfigure in his likeness.

"*Appalling...*" the wizard exhaled, peering closer.

The scholar pulled her hand from his grip as though he'd slapped her.

"You think I *wanted* them?" she hissed.

...Didn't she? Had this all been done against her will?

"Well, you don't seem particularly enraged by this lurid turn of events," he countered crisply. If anyone had attempted anything like that upon the wizard himself, at least eight different Princes would find that person's charred remains scattered across their spheres.

Movement caught their attention before an argument could begin.

Sil, gesturing to nothing in particular.

"The night continues to wax, and I must return to my work," he announced with cold serenity. "I have equipped Caliya with everything she requires to complete the tasks you request of her. You may take her to Tel Fyr."

*Equipped* her? Was he mistaking this living dunmer for one of his tin cans, now?

"Oh, goodbye then," Divayth countered darkly. "I apologize for taking your precious time, old friend. Inconveniencing you with petty mortal matters. In fact," he gestured at the uncomfortable and tottering Ms. Derynval, "had I known something like *this* was your intention, I wouldn't have bothered at all."

*Saved the poor thing some trouble.*

Sil glanced behind himself and briefly regarded the gaping breach Divayth had left in his own machinery, then interlaced his mechanical hands at his waist. "Consider the purpose for your distraction."

Consider the purpose for his distraction? The mad god wasn't even trying to excuse himself.

The wizard narrowed his eyes. "And you call the Daedra barbaric," he accused softly. "I understand that this wind-up replica of civil society means quite a lot to you, *Magnus*, but have you considered that whatever threat my undercroft poses to your little tinkerer's village might not have been worth mutilating your loyal pets over?"

Not that it was any concern of Divayth's, but if *this* was how the "living gods" treated their worshippers, it might be time to rethink his own relationship with them.

The unassailable sorcerer tilted his head a few degrees. "Your anger will not provoke me, Divayth. And your advice is unwelcome. You sought my assistance, and I have provided it to you." A spark of something crossed his fathomless eyes. Something that flinched Ms. Derynval. "Today has been a taxing day, and one I have not anticipated gladly." He glanced briefly at his Apostle. "I will have Caliya's belongings gathered, and arrangements made for discreet delivery. Expect my messenger at Tel Fyr in two days' time."

The scholar made an attempt to speak, but a wordless breath of surrender was all that she managed. She shook her head and looked down at her reconfigured hand as Sil continued to watch. Her subtle failure seemed to pain her mentor more than any insult Divayth could inflict.

"If you think we're finished here," the wizard told him, "you're sorely mistaken, Sil." He stepped away from the two of them and began the sequences to open a portal home. "I will set aside our differences for now, but mark my words -- We *will* discuss this entire evening, whether you 'have the time to' or not."

"As you wish," the sorcerer replied, turning to leave.

His quick dismissal inflamed Divayth's impatience, but the mer was right. It was late. He was tired. Attempting further debate over a complex topic such as morality and mistreatment of captive elves would not lead to any productive outcomes.

"And, Divayth?"

Sil's voice sounded from over his own shoulder.

The wizard turned with an irate glare.

"What is it."

The sorcerer gestured toward Ms. Derynval.

“Catch her, please.”

As though waiting for permission to faint, the quivering scholar took a single step toward the open portal and collapsed.

It was a simple matter to Slow her fall, and Divayth picked her up before she could hit the grate. The woman was out cold, unresponsive and limp. And she weighed almost nothing in his arms.

Satisfied, her mentor dimmed the lights of the Incarnatorium and vanished into the darkness. Divayth scowled at his back until it was gone, then regarded the gore-soaked young woman he’d left behind.

A gift.

Utterly remarkable.

First the tower, then the basement anomaly, and now Ms. Derynval.

It was almost enough to make him regret joining House Telvanni. Nothing good ever came of politics, anyway.

The wizard stepped through the breach and into a sparsely-furnished study on his upper floors. A strapping Argonian male named...well, Divayth barely ever remembered their names anyway, but the scaleskin appeared to have been waiting for him, and stepped forward to give a slight bow.

“The master has returned,” he greeted, eyeing Divayth’s still-dripping charge with that vapid, emotionless gaze their kind always had.

“Yes, yes,” the wizard dismissed, too tired to even be properly annoyed, “your powers of observation continue to astound. Fetch the twins, will you? You know the ones.” He started off. “Have them meet me in the Maiden’s Suite.” He nodded at the stained bootprints he was leaving on his own floor. “And have someone clean this up, as well.”

Perhaps Sil didn’t remember how to treat guests, but Divayth Fyr certainly did.

The rest of this mess would be sorted in the morning.

## Chapter End Notes

Afaik we know very little about Divayth's past besides his birthplace and the fact that he's studied on Artaeum and in the Arcane University in the Imperial City. I like to think, before his tower was built, that he didn't actually have a proper home and just couch-surfed at any collective of mages that tolerated him for as long as he possibly could. College of Winterhold, Summerset, particularly prominent Mages Guild halls, etc. Annoying the men, chasing the ladies. Living the Chad Wizard life. Writing his books. Seeing the world. Etc. ;)

Oh also, I realize I didn't mention this but I'm taking parts of this idea from the Astronomer quest. Whereby Sil just blanks an entire Dunmer's life and condemns him or her to total, unquestionable servitude and loyalty to their god, to serve as a perfect steward of Sil's memories for hundreds/thousands of years. I love this "necessary cruelty" of Sil's existence, along with the occasional hint of "SI only settles burdens upon those who can handle them" that pervades Tribunal religion. This is partially why Caliya's so afraid, uncertain, and profoundly aware of the fact that she too could be snuffed or destined for something similar at any moment.

Hhhhh, Sil is such a good characterrrr

(And of course Divayth only tolerates mysterious theatrics when he's the one performing them)



# Tel Fyr At Last

## Chapter Summary

After her ordeal with Lord Seht, Caliya wakes in Tel Fyr, surrounded by strange new things, and waited on by a strange new pair of servants.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The world resolved slowly as Caliya came to. But parts of it were missing. And much was...wrong. The aurbis felt thin. Thinner than she had ever known. And it was, for lack of a better word...colorful. A slipstream of fleeting impressions, flowing and blending like dye in warmed oil. An ocean of currents, studded by strange emitters. A kaleidoscope of magic in fractured, unfamiliar tendrils.

Gone was the ever-present blanket of Lord Seht's might. The subtle vibrato of the distant City. And the scholar couldn't feel her body at all.

"I'm dead."

She startled violently, forcing numb arms to raise her, curling insensate legs beneath.

No. They weren't numb. They had just been...

...Asleep?

She wasn't dead. She was fine.

Disoriented, but fine. A stupid moment of animal panic.

Comfort distracted her. The scholar was sitting on something soft. Something elastic, gently compressive.

A bed.

Rich burgundy fabric bunched around her, made of the sort of organic material she found on exodromals out in the Radius, and so much more of it than she had ever seen in her life. It sprawled across the spongy pallet, reaching in great sheets toward an iridescent, blackish veil hung around her periphery. The dark elf herself was dressed in a robe of something equally exotic, a shimmering drapery of shadow that reflected what little light pierced the curtains in metallic waves, yet weighed nothing against her skin.

Memory trickled in. The evening. The Incarnatorium. Lord Fyr. Lord Seht. Pain, and revelation. And...And little else. She pulled back her sleeves, tugged open her collar, sliding smooth material along uncut skin. No wounds remained. No scars of her trial. No blood, or stains of any kind.

Well, mostly.

Brass prosthetics still glimmered on her left hand. Faint discolorations of old grease still darkened her natural fingertips, but entire shades of it had been removed. What remained was deeply-set, perhaps something that would never wash out. Even so, she had never seen her skin so...clean. She had never felt so fresh. A clump of hair fell across her face and she pushed it back, then threaded her fingers through the rest to find her sleep-loosened tie.

Her arm pulled free, much sooner than expected. She felt around her head uncertainly.

Her hair had been cut.

And...washed.

*I've been bathed?*

Not by Lord Fyr, Caliya hoped.

She gathered herself to assess where she was and what had happened, crossing her legs and

resting her left arm on her knee to study her new grafts. A problem quickly became apparent, though. They wouldn't move. She curled her remaining two fingers into her palm, but the new augmentations didn't follow. The digits felt stiff -- locked in place. Heavy weight on her wrist. Not *dead* weight -- she could still feel her own nails as she traced the joints -- but unreactive. Like they were jammed.

Lord Seht would not make a mistake enjoining them to her bones. Something else must have happened.

The scholar peered closer, imbuing the brass with Light to study its structure. They seemed tarnished already, age and neglect darkening the teeth of fine gears, clogging sockets and fittings with black cumulate. Under other circumstances this damage wouldn't surprise her -- few things in the scholar's home stayed clean or well-oiled for long -- but she'd always taken meticulous care of Seht's keys. The few times she'd ever used them had been followed by careful polish, and an immediate return to the case she'd first discovered them in.

What, then, had caused such weathering? They looked weeks old, if not older.

A chill prickled her spine.

"...*How long have I been asleep?*" the scholar whispered nervously, turning over her hand and working a fingertip back and forth to try to loosen it. Faint, grinding pain threaded through her arm, all the way up to the elbow. She needed tools, or risked permanent damage.

Dark shapes moved beyond the shroud. Someone was out there. Too fuzzy to see. Hands began to fuss with fabric.

No, not hands.

Claws.

A strange Argonian peered cautiously through a slit in the drapery, then widened the gap. She spoke with a soft rasp.

"The Mistress is awake."

Another peeked over her shoulder, nearly identical to the first. Both were slender of jaw and scaled in emerald, with a stripe of paler green running the length of their cheeks to the undersides of their eyes, and down to their throats. Each head was crested with a pair of spined russet fins beginning just above their brow and disappearing over the backs of their skulls. Two pairs of unreadable orange-yellow eyes peered down at the scholar. They both wore simple outfits, a sleeveless black tunic with red stitching and matching breeches. Embroidered above each of their hearts was a red crest, the same circular insignia as the one on Lord Fyr's armor. The left fin of the Argonian in the background was pierced with a small silver ring.

Caliya's Light faded. As the scholar watched them watch her, a single familiar thread of power curled through the air, dark and warm. Lord Fyr himself was somewhere nearby. Somewhere below.

*Is this...?*

Tel Fyr.

She'd made it out of the Clockwork City.

"...Hello," the scholar offered quietly.

"Greetings," the foreground Argonian replied. "Did the Mistress sleep well?"

The scholar looked down at herself, at the acres of natural Tamrielic fabric that she was currently swimming in. At the impossibly soft mattress on which she sat. At the pile of comfortable, black-cased pillows behind her, one still dented from cradling her head.

"...Yes." Her mind raced to put the pieces together now that she had company expecting responses from her. "Thank you."

"Very good."

Caliya looked up again. She wasn't particularly familiar with Argonians. Not many of their kind fell into the Clockwork City or came there willingly, and fewer still made it into the ranks of the Apostles once they'd arrived. She had never really gotten the hang of the lizard-folk.

"I am Sees-Inner-Beauty," the nearer one introduced, before stepping back to touch her companion's elbow, "and this is Gazes-Gently-Upon." The other Argonian stepped closer and

dipped her head in acknowledgment, but the first continued to speak. "Master Fyr has instructed us to tend to you. He has informed us that you are new to Vvardenfell and may find many things strange or unusual in the currents of this river."

"Please do not hesitate to ask any questions you may have," the other finally added, in an identical though slightly softer voice.

Sees-Inner-Beauty nodded in agreement. Both of them waited for Caliya to reply.

The scholar mulled their words over in her head, confirming a number of her suspicions. Vvardenfell. She was really here. Divayth had taken her home.

She regarded her new attendants carefully. This wasn't the Fortress. These weren't Apostles. She wasn't used to company, but she had no reason to bristle at them just yet. They hadn't even interrupted dinner.

And it was quite apparent that she would be needing them, at least until she had her bearings here.

Here, on Tamriel Above.

Free at last.

"...Well, I'll probably have questions," she admitted, still feeling these two out. "And...some of them might be strange."

She hated being at an intellectual or an informational disadvantage. But she was just going to have to grind the gears until they fit.

Sees-Inner-Beauty nodded. "Of course."

Gazes piped up unexpectedly, adopting a bright tone. "The master mentioned they might be. He said you come from a--"

A quick and unfathomable glance by Sees silenced her. The other Argonian shrank slightly, fins folding back to her skull.

Under no circumstances was Caliya about to let that go. "He said I come from what?"

Sees attempted something that was probably meant to resemble a smile.

"Please pay Gazes no mind," she apologized. "Her tongue flows like a stream in a storm."

Did it? As if those sorts of people weren't the most useful to dig information out of. The scholar managed a smirk, and tried a joke.

"Maybe she should have been named Talks-Too-Much." But when that failed to elicit anything other than awkward discomfort, she changed gears. "I thought you said you'd answer my questions, though..."

Straightforward humor had never been her forte. Caliya hadn't wanted to push buttons this early, but she wasn't above a bit of needling to get what she wanted.

The two Argonians exchanged a glance. Sees narrowed her eyes. Gazes lowered her snout and looked at the floor.

"Master Fyr said you come from a sheltered stream," the guilty Argonian admitted. "Customs that seem normal to us or to your fellow Dunmer might be unknown to you."

Oh. Why did Sees-Inner-Beauty consider that worth shaming?

"He's right," the scholar replied, wondering exactly what Divayth had told them. Hope reflected in Gazes's rising glance. Her fins unflattened. Caliya looked from her to Sees and back. "You might have to be a little patient with me while I...sort everything out."

As if anyone had ever been patient with her before. Anyone less saintly than a living god, that is.

However, Gazes nodded eagerly. "Yes. When you came to us, you were like a dying fish tossed to the shores."

A sharp elbow chastened the chattier woman again, but it was more useful information for Caliya to digest. She didn't remember everything about that night with Lord Seht and Divayth, but she *did* remember why it had ended so abruptly. What state she must have been in when she came here.

"I imagine I was," she replied a bit somberly. "I had a bit of a rough time before my arrival."

An understatement, for sure. But she didn't know *how* much they knew about her, or the



"river" she'd washed ashore from, and she was disinclined to volunteer that information just yet.

Sees-Inner-Beauty took charge again before Gazes could reply. "We have been instructed to offer you another bath, Mistress," she said. "You were given one last night as well. Master Fyr would like us to show you around your chambers, and bring you to him when you are presentable. Are you ready to rise and begin the day?"

"Last night?" Caliya echoed immediately. "I've only been here one evening?"

She looked down at her hand as Sees confirmed this.

"You have been asleep for quite a long time -- it is almost lunch -- but yes, only one night. You arrived a few minutes past midnight."

Twelve hours, then. More or less. But why was her hand so...aged?

"...Ah. Yes," the Argonian added. Caliya looked up to see her studying the elf's hand as well. "We...did not know what to do with your...hand."

"We've never seen it before," Gazes added tentatively.

Sees nodded. "We did not know if it could safely touch water. It may need a better cleaning."

A *better* cleaning. Caliya invoked another Light and peered more closely at the grime. Maybe it wasn't tarnish. It didn't feel like tarnish, now that she considered other possibilities. It was hard and flaky, like rust. Or...

Stained white and blue robes flashed sickeningly through her mind.

*Or like dried blood.*

"I can clean them," she replied, looking up and dispelling her Light. Blood this congealed would be tricky to remove from such fine brasswork, but not impossible. "I'm ready to get up."

Time to sort things out.

The lizardfolk exchanged another glance and nodded, then each took one half of the drapery and drew them aside, revealing the entire bedchamber. While they tied the curtains to posts at the corners of the mattress and busied themselves with other sides of the bed, Caliya separated from the sheets and inched her way toward their edge, looking around.

The sight that greeted her parted the scholar's lips. She understood immediately why the aurbis felt so "colorful."

"Mystical" didn't even begin to do it justice.

She was surrounded by life.

Gone was any semblance of artifice or brass. Not a trace of gears or bare pipeworks in sight. Her guidebooks supplied her with answers for much of what her gaze landed on, but no written text could match what unfolded before her. The chamber was circular and dark, but spacious and organic. There were no real edges in sight. The pale floor met the darker walls along a quick curve rather than any definable corner, and these sloped naturally into the arched ceiling. Fibrous patterns and thick organic veins textured the surfaces. Ivy draped from anywhere it could find purchase. In lieu of glass lamps or torch sconces, luminous bulbs hung from thick stalks rooted right into architecture. These and other bursts of leafy flowers clustered along the floor, ceiling, and walls, casting a serene, bluish-white twilight that made it tricky to determine the true color of anything. The centerpiece of the room was a small, stone-lined, earth-filled well, from which erupted another small collection of varied Tamrielic botany. Above this draped more exotic species of vine and leaf, some offsetting the gloaming walls with a gentle, orange-pink sunrise shine of their own.

Tel Fyr was a Telvanni tower -- Divayth had mentioned that very early on in their evening together, and again out on the balcony of the Recollective Zenith. The Telvanni grew their towers from great mushrooms. The scholar could feel the quiet resonance of its life force flowing around her, large and heavy, the slowest "current" in the aurbic stream. And apparently they filled the inner halls with more of the same unchecked flora. The only mushrooms Caliya had ever seen were the Ironstalks harvested and experimented with in Slag Town, but she remembered how alien even those had seemed. And she'd never once set foot in the Everwound Wellspring.

Even the furniture seemed grown rather than built, all blackish-brown curves and spikes somehow intersecting to form things like chairs and tables. A dark vanity desk held a great rounded

looking-glass in a splintered frame beside a stately, spined armoire. The most "crafted" parts of the room appeared to be a pair of circular doors, one opposite the bed and the other off to Caliya's left, made of what were probably real wood planks decorated (or held together) by winding spirals of shaped silver metal. Great brown banners bearing the crest of House Telvanni flanked the farther one.

A scaled hand at the corner of the scholar's eye caught her attention. Sees-Inner-Beauty offered a palm to help her up. She considered taking it but one look at her stiff grafts changed her mind, and she shook her head and rose without assistance. Best not to stress her new fingers, damaged as they already were.

The floor compressed a bit beneath her bare soles, neither warm nor cold. Just slightly springy. Gently-Gazes-Upon laid a pair of slippers beside her feet. Caliya thanked the Argonian and stepped into them, then crossed toward the nearest wall and inspected one of the vines of ivy within reach.

The feel of its leaves was unlike anything she had ever touched. Cool and smooth, its surface caught her skin like a rubber, so very unlike Lord Seht's sharp metal bushes and foil-thin underbrush. She studied the stems and veins, the way the tissues flexed as she bent them, the new shoots, paler green and yet to unfold. They didn't glitter like the decorations in the Radius. But she saw, for the first time, exactly what the Clockwork God was meaning to emulate with his shining trees and polished flowers, and failed to understand what he found superior in his malleable facsimiles to this...natural complexity.

Sees stepped closer. "Everything here is alive," she offered, gesturing to the walls as Caliya glanced back at her. "All of the plants are real. Even the walls. We are inside a great mushroom tower, grown by the finest Telvanni architects."

The scholar nodded as she listened to things she already knew, eyeing one of the luminous bulbs. She traced its outer shell carefully. It was taut to the touch, like an exodromal wineskin in use.

"Do you know a lot about these plants?" she asked, squeezing the fruit. There was a structure inside them, heavily obscured by their milky blue glow. Sparkling particulates flowed within, drifting in a lazy swirl as she disrupted their stasis.

Sees and Gazes exchanged a glance.

"...Not *very* much, Mistress--" one began.

"--But we are sure Master Fyr has books in his library, if you would like to learn more," the other added.

His library.

What sorts of books did a mer like Divayth carry?

Sees nodded in agreement. "And, with respect, he would like to greet you soon, if you will allow us to help you bathe and dress."

Another bath. Right. They had mentioned that. Caliya looked from one Argonian to the other, then down at her own hands. Did she need one? Perhaps she shouldn't argue.

"I would also like to finish cutting your hair," Gazes added with subtle but noticeable cheer.

"--We hope you don't mind the trim," Sees continued hastily.

"It was quite a mess, and Master Fyr agreed it would be easiest to simply cut it shorter." Despite another pointed stare from her partner, Gazes continued. "It will look much healthier and prettier this way. Many lovely elves wear their hair shorter these days. It is quite fashionable."

There was an earnest hope in her otherwise harsh voice that further softened the scholar's opinion of them. She wanted to be helpful. They both did.

Maybe it was the newness of it all. Maybe it was the growing thrill of the truth as it began to sink in. But Caliya felt inclined to indulge these strange lizardfolk. After all, they were Divayth's servants. And the quicker she was dressed and settled in, the quicker she could...

...See the rest of Tamriel for herself.

The scholar smirked again at Gazes. "Not much of a choice, have I?" she teased, fussing with her shortened locks as Sees's gesture toward the door unflanked by banners. She didn't love the

idea of *being* bathed, but it seemed normal enough to these two, who apologized for the incompleteness of her care as they followed her. Sees-Inner-Beauty opened the door as Gazes explained, a bit clumsily but with pleasant enthusiasm, about the logistical difficulties of caring for an unconscious guest.

The washroom was just as remarkable. Another dusky cavern of plants and spikes, yet there was something luxurious about it. The bath itself was a stone-lined basin of smooth black rock set into a steep rise in the floor, easily large enough for a party of orcs. It looked more like a pool, and it was already full of water so clear Caliya wouldn't have realized it was even there, save for the reflections on its still surface. A sink and other mirrors, cabinets, and washroom fixtures dotted the periphery, all crafted of those same melded spines as the bedchamber.

Sees helped her out of her robe -- it took a bit of unexpected fortitude to be naked in company - and, with permission, slipped her own sandals off and stepped first into the water to guide the dunmer in after. The topography of the dark stone was difficult to discern in the bioluminescence, but climbing treacherous surfaces was one of the scholar's specialties.

The water was warm. Soothing. Relaxing. Lightly perfumed as well, though Caliya couldn't identify the scent. The scholar didn't take baths in Clockwork. She could rarely spare the fluid, and soap hardly existed as a concept in the Fortress, let alone a commodity. Mostly she washed what needed washing in her own sink -- hair, feet, particularly greasy limbs. Magic tended to cleanse the rest, when absolutely necessary. But not here. Here, they could be thorough. No shortage of supplies necessitated anything less.

Gazes set off to gather a pile of towels and cloths and other unidentifiables from the storage cabinets and set them close by, in woven baskets.

Sees regarded the scholar's left hand uncertainly. "Perhaps you could teach us to clean this for you, Mistress?" she asked, holding Caliya's wrist above the water.

The scholar studied the supplies Gazes continued to fetch. Of course none of her own tools had come here with her.

"They really ought to be kept oiled, but first we need to clean the blood away," she replied. She looked up at the still-dry Argonian. "Do you happen to have any..." The scholar searched for words. "...Thin sticks?" She had no idea what objects were potentially available to her, but she had the confidence that she could make do with anything even vaguely resembling what she needed. "Preferably something that can reach into very tight spaces."

The servants exchanged a brief glance and Gazes left to check the cabinets. She returned with a surprising assortment of exactly what the scholar needed -- metal picks, tweezers and spindles, and a large pile of slender wooden spines, each about a finger's length. One end was sharpened to a point, and a tuft of cotton had been affixed to the other. She separated one from the pile and examined it with quiet disbelief.

"Are these disposable?" she asked.

"Yes," both Argonians replied.

Not in Clockwork they wouldn't have been. She twirled the tool between her fingertips, marvelling at the very first of what she was certain would be a series of incredulous experiences with the materials and customs of an entire continent unshackled from scarcity.

"These are perfect, thank you," she told Gazes, inching the entire basket closer to the edge. The woven fibers were dried plant material, not a metallic replica thereof.

Stunning.

She dipped her hand into the water. The conductive brass heated more quickly than natural flesh, and tingled pleasant feedback through her nerves. They were less alien than she expected them to be, but the realization was tainted with bitter disappointment, of all things. Lord Seht had scared her well with medical anecdotes of Apostles who'd regretted their augmentations, Apostles for whom the surgeries had transformed a limb into a hated monstrosity. And now, as she set about carefully loosening congealed blood from her new joints, she understood why he had soured her to the idea. For years, she'd thought he was softening the blow of a rejected application. Warning her that she would suffer the same fate as those whose own bodies disgusted them, should she pursue

her own replacements. But it was all for this. To preserve her natural flesh for his own purposes. His own particular gift.

Denying her yet another privilege of choice. Bending her path toward his own designs, then stripping her of even the common courtesy of anaesthetic to endure the pain.

"...Mistress?"

Caliya looked up, and realized she was glaring at her fingers. She was angry, angrier with Lord Seht than she had ever been, for reasons that would take hours if not days to detangle. She didn't want to start in to them just yet, however. He was gone, his meddling out of her life forever, and she was free. She didn't want to think about him right now. Didn't want to confront that ugly, sour thing that sat in a puddle of its own burning poison in the back of her mind.

Right now, she wanted to pick up the pieces, and move on.

Sees watched her face carefully, then gestured at her hands. "You may show me, and I can clean your..."

"...My grafts," Caliya supplied when she trailed off. Easier to say than "prosthetics" or "augmentations." But she shook her head. "I'll care for them, thank you. They're very delicate." And very easy for *her* to clean, she quickly discovered. The magic that connected them to her flesh provided all the sensory information she needed to know exactly how much pressure she could scrub with, and where to apply it.

Sees nodded quietly. "As you wish. Master Fyr has provided powerful cleansers for your skin as well. We were able to remove much of the stains last night, and a second application is expected to lift the remainder."

Cleansers?

Gazes settled in behind her and gathered magic. The Argonian's power swelled a small, heated wave over the scholar's shoulders, tugging her backward toward the edge.

"Please lie back, Mistress," she urged. "I will finish trimming your hair."

Another exchange of glances and a series of silent posturing between the two followed this request, but Caliya obliged her, scooting closer and leaning against the lip of the bath. The rock itself was warm, she realized. Not just the water within. More of it rose from the basin and soaked her hair, sending a soothing tingle down the woman's spine.

"Then I will bathe the rest of you," Sees informed her, gathering a handful of objects Caliya couldn't quite identify before they sank beneath the surface along with the lizard herself.

Almost as soon as her partner was submerged, Gazes spoke again. Her claws slipped through the dunmer's hair, combing locks free.

"Sees is right," she began softly. "My tongue flows like a river in rain sometimes. I hope I do not offend you."

"You're fine," Caliya reassured her, trying to hold still as she listened to the sound of scissors. "Honestly, I don't know why Sees is so short with you. You're not bothering me." It was a bit difficult to focus on much conversation, though. She hadn't been cared for like this since she was young, when the Apostles demanded a certain appearance from her. Faint memories of annoyed Initiates and Auxiliaries dragging her as a petulant child and irascible teenager to coarse-handed grooming factotums by the order of some Proctor or other had left her rather adverse to any personal assistance. Gazes was, by contrast, quite gentle.

"...Master Fyr does not care much for our people," the Argonian admitted in a hush, clipping away, "and many of his dark elf guests are the same way. Sees-Inner-Beauty wants me to keep quiet because I...have a tendency to annoy guests who wish to bask in quiet peace."

That explained a bit. Caliya tried not to flinch when she felt something close around her ankle. A hand, she hoped. Soft, spongy material ran back and forth along the length of her lower leg.

*This won't be happening again,* she decided promptly.

"Well, I don't mind," the scholar promised. "This is all so new to me, it's hard to explain how little I know. Having a volunteer with information is helpful."

The woman gave a strange chuff that took Caliya a few moments to recognize as a laugh.

"May I ask where you are from, Mistress? If you don't want to say, I understand."

A valid question, and it told her that Divayth hadn't told them much -- if anything -- about her. But, where to begin? She knew enough scripture and teachings of the Tribunal to understand at least a bit of how Nirn Above viewed the realm of Sotha Sil. The myth and metaphor surrounding it. The impossible contradictions of its existence. Things even Caliya didn't quite grasp, lacking in external context as she was.

"Let's just say I come from a place where all of this is...impossible," she settled on. "I don't mean to brush it aside, but it would be difficult to explain."

Gazes grunted in quiet disappointment. Maybe in time, if she often saw and actually befriended these two, Caliya could explain a bit better. If they actually cared, and weren't just making idle conversation. But not yet.

And she didn't really want to talk about it yet, either. That poison still pooled within her, sour and sharp.

"We are just happy that you are well, Mistress," the Argonian replied, pushing the top of the dark elf's head forward. Caliya looked down at the water as Gazes fussed with her hair. More painless cutting followed. "We were quite scared by how you came to us. You were unwounded but covered in blood, and it took a long time to clean you."

"That must have been a strange sight..."

The scholar noticed that she was tensing -- waiting for a clipped ear. Grooming factotums were not particularly graceful with fine movements.

"I have never seen anything like it. And your hand..."

Caliya paused her cleaning to loosen the joints she'd cleared so far. With a bit of grinding pain it broke free, and she was able to curl one almost halfway to her palm. She dipped the brass back into the water to rinse it.

"This isn't common, then?" she asked. Of course it wasn't -- she knew that -- but how uncommon was it? How often had other Apostles *really* been allowed to leave the City? And...just how far was Tel Fyr from Clockwork? Annoyance resurfaced over the old wounds of her dozens of denied applications. She struggled to push it back down. All part of a perfect, divine plan.

"I've never seen it," Gazes replied. "And Master Fyr brings in all sorts of strange guests from all over Tamriel..."

"Does he?"

The Argonian offered another chuffing laugh.

"I shouldn't say too much, Sees will be very upset..."

Caliya could feel her partner diligently at work beneath the surface of the water.

"Good thing she can't hear you, then," the scholar replied with what she hoped was a coy invitation.

## Chapter End Notes

A brief interlude, to settle things down a bit. I apologize that I'm not great with Argonian turns-of-phrase, or naming conventions. (I have an EU server alt called Heals-If-Asked-Nicely). If anyone asks, Sees and Gazes have been around dark elves long enough to dilute their culture. Or...something. I'm trying to nail down their "not-traditionally-expressive" mannerisms blended with heavy body language to communicate nonverbally, as well.

Also this section cost me fifteen US dollars to write. ;) I had to renew my ESO Plus subscription just to visit Tel Fyr and other Telvanni towers in order to remember what they look like inside, since there are pretty much no proper screenshots of the place (and I might change this by uploading some to the Wiki). It's very hard to shake the

"tan, ribbed, uniformly lit, claustrophobic halls and sponge-colored rooms" of the original Morrowind, though. Almost as hard as it is to properly capture the breathtaking beauty of their ESO remake.

Anyway fear not, we'll get back into the Divayth action very soon, once Cali's gone through a bit of a Tamrielic glow-up....

# Problems and Their Eventual Solutions

## Chapter Summary

Surprise! It's a new character. Divayth discusses the latest logistical developments with a student when Ms. Derynval shows up, new and vastly improved.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Aryon looked dour. But the Telvanni Spellwright always carried a dark cloud when he had poor news to share. Divayth sighed and waved him closer, wondering just how much time *this* little disturbance would waste.

“...Good afternoon, Lord Fyr,” the dunmer began grimly over the quiet bustle. “I have an unfortunate update.”

“Yes, I gathered that from your general demeanor, Aryon, what is it?” the wizard replied, not rising from his chair. He set his cup of tea on the table beside him and rested the latest unbound report from the caverns on his crossed knee. He was not alone in his study; a handful of mostly-elven workers lined the dark walls at tables full of dwemeri and clockwork scraps, conversing quietly and cataloging their findings. Attendant Argonians wandered among them, bioluminescence glinting off their scales and the brass piecemeal they carried by the armful to or from various sorting stations. A few heads turned as the mage, immaculately-robed in bronze spirals on a brown Telvanni base, passed them by.

Aryon seemed to take a moment to gather himself as he stood at the stone-lined foot of the platform that elevated his mentor above the workforce. A shrewder politician than most of his kinsmen, he'd quite literally come with the building. Divayth's reluctant agreement to join House Telvanni had been due largely to the mage's relentless persuasion, and the very concept of Tel Fyr as a gift had been Aryon's brainchild to begin with. According to rumor, a promotion awaited the mer if all went satisfactorily, though the spellwright himself hadn't yet admitted this. Needless to say, Divayth was not interested in making such things easy, though not out of any particular malice toward his now-fellow kinsman. Rather, problems simply seemed to keep cropping up around the expansion, and the wizard expected proper solutions.

Aryon tucked his arms behind the small of his back. “The latest survey team has been lost.”

Ah. Of course.

“Lost contact, or dead?” Divayth sought to clarify.

“Presumably dead.”

“But unconfirmed.”

Aryon dipped his head in agreement. “So far.”

The wizard nodded and snapped the loose papers in his lap with a flick of his wrist to stiffen them, lowering his eyes once more. “And what would you like me to do about this development?”

He pretended not to hear the slightly disappointed exhale.

“Perhaps we could organize another party to search for them?”

“Very good.”

Divayth sipped his tea. He wanted to resume reading as well, but the spellwright lingered in his periphery.

“We are...struggling to find more volunteers, sera,” Aryon confessed.

The wizard closed his eyes and drew an impatient breath. “And how are the coffers?”

“The coffers?”

He fixed his kinsman with a piercing stare. "Did our lost surveyors take your better sensibilities with them, Aryon?" Divayth asked. "I understand that dealing with the common rabble is, at best, an exercise in futility, but that is no excuse for allowing their stupidity to infect *you* as well. Are my finances sufficient enough to increase the reward for a successful sojourn into Abanabi?"

Recognition dawned. Finally, a sign of intelligence. "I will check," the spellwright replied. "I believe so--"

"Sell something if you must," Divayth instructed flatly, dropping his gaze. "I won't have these lackwits taking valuable information to their graves."

Even the mere consideration of such logistics annoyed him. A distraction from the true challenge, and another delay to its eventual conquest.

Aryon offered a pretentious little bow. "As you wish, Lord Fyr."

It was just obsequious enough to trigger the wizard's ire. He set down his tea and papers again and scowled, interrupting the mer's next question about recovering the remains along with their reports.

--No, I don't *care* about the damned bodies, Aryon, if they have families so insistent on burying their dead, perhaps you can equip *them* and send *them* down into the caves to fetch the corpses themselves! Perhaps they'll be more useful than the rabble we've sourced thus far."

Aryon withdrew slightly as Divayth rose from his chair and descended the two steps that elevated his view of the cataloguing. The wizard sensed power gathering within him, a cautious reflex against what he no-doubt feared might become an attempt to settle disputes in the classic Telvanni manner.

But Divayth had no such intentions.

"Tell me, Aryon, what possessed you to relate this matter to me?" the wizard asked narrowly, mirroring his kinsman's posture. They had become reasonable friends in the months leading up to Divayth's enlistment -- due in no small part to Aryon's useful combination of magical aptitude and social composure -- but in the wake of this fetcherfly's nest of a business arrangement, their relationship had begun to crumble.

The slick politician held his ground. "One would think the tower's master still interested in the latest developments of his project." Circumspect strength colored his tone. "Particularly concerning further loss of life."

And since when did these things matter to the Telvanni?

"Do you expect me to hold a memorial service for every fresh batch of fallen?" the wizard challenged.

"Of course not, Lord Fyr."

"A candlelight vigil for potential survivors?" Divayth pressed.

"No, sera."

If he was annoyed, the spellwright hid it well.

"Then why do you feel compelled to distract me with trivialities?" The wizard tugged crisply at his robe to smooth its skirts. He had forgone his usual armor to recline in black and red silk-lined comfort, today. If only the day's events would likewise cooperate. "I ask for summarizations and little else. If someone *other* than myself is capable of handling the latest unexpected obstacle, see to it that they do. If that man is you, there is never a need to share with me *any* up-to-the-minute minutiae."

Most eyes were on them by now. Aryon fussed with his sleeve, avoiding Divayth's gaze as he did so.

"As you wish," he repeated, perhaps a bit more curt than usual.

The spellwright waited to be dismissed. Refusing the courtesy, Divayth lowered his voice, at least enough to deny a significant portion of the more distant eavesdroppers.

"I dislike distractions," the wizard began tersely, "and I am more than disappointed that a mer of your civil perception would fail to notice this, Aryon. You came to me seeking to test my knowledge and temperament, and thereafter to aid my transition into the ranks of your beloved



Great House. You took an interest in more than mere logistics, my friend -- you took a wise interest in me." He narrowed his eyes, studying his kinsman carefully. "I have put you through your paces to earn this privilege, and so far you have proven useful. However, if these increasingly-frequent visitations are your idea of an attempt at remaining in the forefront of my mind, they will not lend you any further esteem. Rather, if you intend to continue currying my favor, you will confine the amount of headaches I must endure to those which *only* I can settle. Make decisions. Report successes." He folded his arms. "Free my time, and perhaps I will use more of it to your personal advantage. Yes?"

Thankfully, despite the spellwright's dismay, Aryon listened well. The mer's expression transitioned from uncertain to opportunistic, and he settled his posture -- and power -- calmly.

"Understood, Lord Fyr," he replied with a renewed diplomacy that told Divayth his point had, in fact, sunken in this time. "I do hope you'll forgive the intrusion. I'll have the matter dealt with, and the surveyors' data reclaimed."

The wizard nodded. "See to it, then."

He started back up the steps to resume his chair, his tea, and his report when a thread of last evening's events slipped through his power, turning his head. Across the room more guests had arrived -- the scaleskin twins, with a third in tow. Divayth smirked and stopped the retreating spellwright, and gestured to him to follow.

"Nevermind the surveys, Aryon, it seems your interruption was fortuitous after all. Come," he invited, leading the mer toward their entourage. "Let me introduce you to last night's acquisition."

"Acquisition?" Aryon echoed, a pace behind.

The wizard didn't answer. Explanations would come in due time. So late had he returned to the tower that not many knew he'd brought back with him a little Clockwork souvenir.

Both of the lizardfolk stopped and bowed as their master approached, but he brushed their menial greetings -- and the argonians themselves -- aside. He was eager to see what they'd made of Ms. Derynval, and more than a little irate that neither one of the scaleskins had thought to send word that she was awake, alert, and capable of holding audience.

His impatience was promptly rewarded.

A completely different woman stood before the wizard.

In fact, he wouldn't have believed she was the same dark elf he'd watched Sil butcher not half a day before, save for the living god's lingering divinity still faintly wafting about her. Short, lively black curls now framed the scholar's oval face, lending her a freshness and pleasant modernity. Her lips were painted in crisp charcoal, and something subtle had been done to her eyes as well -- a thickening of the lashes perhaps, to bring them to the forefront of attention, and to highlight a beauty she was lucky she hadn't had the night before.

He might never have let her escape that balcony of hers, otherwise.

Her dress was one of his favorites in the guest collection, a low-cut corset of rich sapphire patterned in winding silver ivy over a floor-length skirt of the same, accentuating the slender figure for which her shapeless Apostle robes had done no favors. A wide gray collar with blue trim hugged her throat and draped across the woman's understated chest, layering three blue-trimmed diamonds atop bare, dusky shoulders. She had added a pair of gray guarskin gloves to the ensemble, ending in flared points at the elbow. He caught a glimpse of light, strappy sandals to replace her clunky Clockwork boots as the woman's hem settled. A crisp, agreeable spice that reminded the wizard of the Khajiiti caravans of Skyrim accompanied her presence.

More than mere appearance, however, the scholar's entire aspect had taken a dramatic turn. Determination glittered in the woman's scarlet eyes. Her posture was open and relaxed, arms tucked behind her back, chin held aloft with the air of a councilor's daughter presenting herself for inspection by potential suitors. She seemed ready to belong, not at all the timid field mouse he might have suspected from a mer so violently uprooted from her home and transported with minimal discussion to a foreign realm.

And Divayth was more than prepared to receive her.

"Lord Fyr," she greeted.

Even her voice seemed transformed, a good night's rest and a few lungfuls of something other than metallic winds and chemical artifice peeling away a layer of hoarse rasp from her tone, revealing a rich timbre beneath.

"What an *improvement*, Ms. Derynval, good afternoon," the wizard replied with keen enjoyment. "I'm pleased to see a dunmeri woman under all that clockwork grime..."

Aryon smirked, but the scholar raised a thin eyebrow.

"You've used that line already, muthsera."

*I beg your pardon?*

The quick reply set him on the back foot. Good to see that she was just as resistant to charm as ever. "Have I?" Divayth countered, tucking a wrist under his elbow and smoothing down his goatee.

Ms. Derynval dazzled with a smirk. "Yes. Right before you accused me of being an erudite skeever Lord Seht had taught to walk upright. Don't you remember?"

That *did* sound like him. The wizard held back a snicker, but his kinsman wasn't so quick. Ms. Derynval offered the spellwright an interested glance as Aryon recovered his humor, and Divayth eyed him as well with a bit of perfunctory disappointment.

"Do try to avoid salivating on my floors, if you don't mind." He returned his attention to the woman. "How are you feeling, my dear?"

"Well-recovered," she replied with a quiet amusement of her own. The woman tilted her head at the hive of activity around them. "A bit speechless, if I may be honest."

Of course she would be. Divayth's proud smirk widened. "Overwhelmed by your first steps into Tamriel?" he guessed. "Don't worry, dear, we'll settle you in. Have you eaten yet?" He glast a quick glower at the nearer of the twins. "You haven't fed her, yes?"

The scaleskin's crest flattened to her head. "No, Master Fyr."

"--We were instructed not to," the other added without being asked.

The wizard considered addressing the insolence, but decided against doing so in front of guests. "Good. Have the kitchens prepare a lunch," he commanded. "For myself and a guest. *Simple* foods." He was certain to emphasize that particular request. Ms. Derynval had been raised on the sort of tasteless gruel and rot that would not be out of place at a feast of Namira; her stomach would have to be gently acclimated to a new diet. "We'll take the meal in the master's overlook."

As the Argonian bowed and backed away, the scholar stepped back as well, touching her arm.

"Thank you, Sees," she said to the scaleskin, "for everything."

Divayth sucked his teeth. "Don't address them, Ms. Derynval, they'll get uppity about their station."

The lizard's fins re-flattened, but she was smart enough to hurry off without another word. The other followed despite a lack of orders, but that hardly bothered the wizard. They were always together -- they worked better in a pair than either did when separated from the other. It kept up their morale, as well.

The scholar watched them go with a prim frown. "They were very helpful, muthsera," she argued, eyeing him with hints of the contrarian hermit he'd met on the cliff. "More than most."

"I should hope so," Divayth agreed, "They wouldn't last long if they weren't." He turned his attention to his kinsman -- the man appeared to have reclaimed his wits -- and gestured toward the scholar. "Aryon. Allow me to introduce Ms. Caliya Derynval. She is a specialist in Clockwork curios, and will be assisting us in technical matters related to our ever-growing number of subterranean foes. She is quite the artificer, and possesses a wealth of magical talent I've had the privilege of witnessing last evening." He glanced at her with a twinkle. "Sil himself has lent us the woman from his own personal army of eccentric faithful."

Far from flattering, though, his final line seemed to leave a sour taste on Ms. Derynval's tongue. Divayth expected some form of further off-putting commentary from the scholar based on her expression, but she seemed to think better of it, and sized up Aryon with a polite nod.

A pity. Her caustic retorts were beginning to grow on him.

The wizard laid a hand on his kinsman's shoulder. "Aryon here is a spellwright among the

Telvanni, in charge of the growth and expansion of Tel Fyr,” he continued, addressing Ms. Derynval. “You will be coordinating your efforts with his to battle back against Sil’s pseudo-mechanical hordes.”

Aryon offered a cordial smile of his own and tipped his head in greeting. “A pleasure, Caliya. I’m sure you’ll be a valuable addition to the project. It’s no small feat to earn the approval of both Lord Fyr *and* Sotha Sil.”

The scholar considered his words. “I suppose that’s a word for it,” she agreed. “I assure you, I’ll make every effort to catch myself up to speed quickly, sera.”

Aryon’s smile widened. “Straight to business, I see. Good, we like that kind of efficiency around here.”

Divayth gave an amused chuckle. “Patience, Aryon, you’re not getting her just yet. Eager as I can tell you are to get...acquainted. At the earliest, she’ll join you tomorrow,” the wizard informed his kinsman. “I may yet keep her from you a few days, in fact, depending on her adaptability. The woman joins us from an unusually sheltered life, and I’m loath to overwhelm her with too much novelty at once.”

And of course, Divayth had plenty of his own ideas about how the scholar ought to take her first few steps in Tamriel, now that she was the guest in his home.

Ms. Derynval eyed him with something approaching indignation. “I pride myself on adaptability, muthsera. As soon as you want me to, I can begin work.”

The wizard folded his arms. “Yes, I don’t doubt your enthusiasm for industry, Ms. Derynval; however, I don’t *want* you ready for work just yet -- I want you ready for *lunch*.” He lowered his voice, stepping closer so even fewer around them could hear. “I prefer not to have to repeat myself, but I’ll forgive you the necessity; you’ve been through a lot. Tamriel does not demand the joyless toil of Sil’s realm, and I am no divine taskmaster for a woman of your caliber.” He touched her arm just above the elbow, tracing clean skin with bare fingers. “You’re in *my* world now, my dear. And all of the luxury that comes with it.”

A subtle blush darkened the scholar’s cheeks, though her demeanor didn’t otherwise change. “I’ve already encountered quite a bit of that,” she murmured quietly, just for him.

Divayth chuckled darkly. “Ms. Derynval, you’ve experienced nothing yet,” the wizard promised. He eyed the spellwright before them -- quick enough to catch a fleeting glimpse of dismay. “And, if I’m not mistaken, Aryon, you have plenty of work to busy yourself with. Decisions to make, successes to report, hm?”

The way his kinsman’s gaze lingered on them before he nodded and took his leave entertained Divayth quite a bit. If the mer thought for a moment he’d be laying anything but eyes on their newest visitor, he was sorely mistaken. Especially not with the dramatic improvement she had undergone in so short a time.

“Come, my dear,” he invited, leading her off. “You’ve shown me the view from *your* balcony. Allow me the pleasure of sharing the view from mine.”

## Chapter End Notes

Full disclosure Aryon was *\*not\** supposed to show up yet -- I had him in mind for a very specific scene in Sadrith Mora much later on, and his presence at all is pretty much the only reason this fic is marked with Morrowind tags as well as ESO. But then I realized "Wait a minute all the Telvanni who are council members in Morrowind show up in ESO because they're all such damn long-lived crazies, why not Aryon, too? And let's give him something useful to do." Because let's be real, Divayth wouldn't be bothering with all of the menial task coordination himself. He has better things to do, like be annoyed about distractions keeping him from doing better things.

So now the politically-minded Aryon is trying to earn his mentor's favor while climbing the ranks of the Telvanni, and you just KNOW that Divayth competing against anyone for the affections of a woman never ends that well for most of the involved parties.....

(P.S. I hate that Aryon doesn't have a family name)

(P.P.S. Was I a little too gratuitous with Caliya's glow-up? Probably. But whatever she's MY OC so \*pbbbbth\*)

# Brave New World

## Chapter Summary

Divayth takes Caliya to the master's overlook for her first glimpse of Tamriel, and tries his best to appreciate everything his slaves did to beautify her. No longer in the public eye, the scholar is having no part of it.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Caliya had thought Tel Fyr's bedrooms the height of Tamrielic luxury, but the master's overlook proved rather quickly that her scales of judgment were going to need further calibration. Another arched-ceilinged, natural cavern devoid of regular corners or edges, the overlook's interior chamber was larger and loftier than any she had yet seen, though it still managed to keep a sense of arcane comfort. A dining set dominated the space -- a broad ebony table in that strange organic style surrounded by eight matching, spike-twisted chairs. Above this hung a burst of glowing flora, its cascade of leaves and flowers mimicking a chandelier in both form and function. Against the wall to the left stood a desk of similar craftsmanship, and a well-used one by the look of the papers, tools, and other unidentifiables stacked atop its various tiers and overspilling open drawers. An eye-catching fireplace had been hollowed out of the fungal tissue across the way, purple flames crackling around a jumble of crystals piled within like ethereal coals. Shadows danced around it, cast by a long, asymmetrical divan beside a pair of high-backed armchairs flanking a small table. A bookshelf nearby seemed neatly-arranged but only half-stocked.

Draping banners, tapestries, framed artwork, and more canopies of vine and leaf veiled the space with mystic ambiance and splashes of homey light and color. The only absence of decoration was an absence of wall itself, a great hole to the left of the hearth. There the tower's fibrous boundaries had been removed entirely, shaped into a gaping arch during growth. A protective ward layered the gap with nacreous film, but the floor beneath extended out into a crystal-studded platform. The shaded swathe of blue beyond wasn't quite bright enough to overtake the lambent flora within, but it was more than tantalizing for a woman with no memory of a natural sky.

Divayth's quiet chuckle drew the scholar's attention. His gaze followed hers toward the balcony, one hand offered to help her down from the steps of the teleporter. Caliya thought about taking it, but there was no one else here. She didn't need to make a public performance of herself any more.

And neither did he.

The wizard glanced back as she stepped down alone. Undeterred, he took her elbow instead with gentle, ungloved fingers. His power resonated against her augments like the trailing echo of a stricken bell, a brass thrum running strangely through her bones. She quelled it without a word. If Divayth noticed, he didn't give an indication. He merely gestured across the overlook, toward that promising archway, and to the open air beyond.

"Vvardenfell awaits, Ms. Derynval."

And so it did. The scholar started off, promptly leaving her host behind for that bright frontier so close at hand. Or so she thought. She hadn't taken four steps when a spell slipped through her spine and tangled itself in her limbs. Air thickened to cold oil, a river of sludge mired around her chest. She couldn't even turn to glare without immense effort.

"Patience, if you please," Divayth chided. "That eagerness is charming, I assure you, but I've brought you all the way here. I'd like to see what the first glimpse of Tamriel does to your eyes."

The wizard dispelled his Slow before she could get to work on it. Caliya took a steady breath, trying not to be annoyed. Fine. Forty years she'd waited for this. She could afford another few seconds. Of course, he could have been less invasive about it. But his effortless magic still impressed her. She was a guest in his home now, and she'd have to play by his rules, it seemed. In public and private.

Very well.

Divayth offered an elbow and a pointed smirk as he came astride, walking at a deliberately leisurely pace. She eyed it with a blank frown, uncertain what else he wanted from her, but he seemed more than happy to instruct her in the finer points of escorting as he took her arm and threaded it around his own.

"You're really going to make a production of this?" she asked.

"I assure you, I could do far worse," the wizard threatened mirthfully, sizing her up.

She stared right back. "Oh, could you?"

Big mouth, big mistake. Some things just weren't going to change with a new paint job and a fresh set of clothes. An electric fire sparked in the wizard's gaze as she dared to call his bluff.

Subtle fingertips brushed the back of her neck.

Darkness clouded her eyes.

Seht's brass balls, he was quick when he wanted to be.

The Blinded scholar stiffened. "Muthsera!"

"Go on," Divayth urged in her ear, sending a tingling wave through her skin, "continue to challenge me in my own home. See where else it gets you, Ms. Derynval."

Honestly, she had half a mind to, just to push that smug arrogance to its limits. But by Vivec, why couldn't she shut up for five fetching minutes? The scholar felt along the edges of his power, seeking some way to unravel its hold on her. There was only so much she was willing to tolerate.

"Indefatigable, aren't you?" the wizard teased, sensing her attempts to fight back. His magic slipped her focus, undulous and flowing like inky grease.

He was toying with her.

"I'm afraid so," she replied flatly, blinking as though that could help at all. "I prefer to keep the use of as many senses as possible when confronting the unknown."

He gave a theatric sigh. "Sil's Apostolate never did care much for surprises."

His voice was so close, and practically radiated amusement. The wizard guided her forward through this void of his own making, giving her little choice but to match him, pace for pace, if she wanted to keep her dignity. And her balance.

She dug deeper into the tenebrous murk clouding up her vision, struggling to walk and talk and work at the same time. "In a world of procedure and artifice, surprises don't tend to end well."

His magic slipped her concentration again. It was like cupping smoke in her palms.

"I find myself forced to remind you once more that Tamriel is not Clockwork."

"Keep it up, muthsera, I'm feeling particularly thick today."

Divayth pulled her left. Around the dining set, maybe.

"The effects of transliminal passage *have* been known to linger up to a fortnite," he lectured, before lowering his voice. "And you seem the sensitive sort..."

An uneven ridge in the floor scuffed at the scholar's heel, just in time to stop her from saying something else she'd probably regret. Not quite enough to trip, but she tightened her grasp on her guide's steady arm. She was unaccustomed to these light, flexible sandals she'd been given.

"It's not the portal," she replied, ignoring his dark chuckle.

At least he wasn't wearing that spiked armor. She renewed her efforts to unlock his magic. She wanted to "win" *before* she reached their goal, if possible.

"I'm beginning to regret that I allowed you to sleep so late," Divayth added conversationally. "A measure of exhaustion might have tempered that pugnacious spirit."

"If I knew I'd have to handle you at your most intrusive, I might have been inclined to sleep *later*," she fired back, studying the ways he dodged her grasp. There was a pattern to it. A limit to how far he could stretch his own spell. A call-and-response, of sorts.

"Is that so?" the wizard asked. "Yes, what little I've gleaned of your lifestyle certainly suggests you were the shiftless sort in Clockwork, prone to lying about and not one of the busier fetcherflies in Sil's brass nest."

Caliya could hear the smirk in his tone. At least one of them was enjoying this.

"You haven't met many Adjuncts during their Industrial Appraisals, have you?" she asked. She almost had it, now. Honestly, she didn't dare admit it, but part of her also relished the challenge. In another circumstance, she wouldn't have minded their little duel. Testing herself against his power. Taking a measure of her abilities. He certainly didn't seem particularly bothered by the sort of opposition the Congress of Calibration had once considered a "brazen misalignment of the divine gears," after all.

Just...not while she was staggering gracelessly through lightless pitch.

A ripple of something dissipated in front of her. The scholar flinched to a stop. A wave of warmth layered itself against her skin.

The ward.

It was gone.

Disappointment gave way as a soft breeze ruffled her hair. It carried with it an indescribable redolence, impossibly familiar yet utterly unplaceable, and beckoned her to breathe deeply through parted lips. A mineral taste collected on her tongue. Salt on the wind. And a kind of soot as well, but earthier than she'd ever experienced. Richer, somehow. And something else. Something new.

Atmospheric moisture.

In the distance, a sloshing roar. Slow and rhythmic, like the ponderous sway of a mixing vat. Above this, the symphony of life, the cries of strange beasts and the bustle of civil economy. Divayth urged her forward. Her feet obeyed. Power weaved itself into being in front of them. The wizard untethered her from his arm and guided her hand to a railing that hadn't been there before. She laid both palms on it to steady herself. Thin and smooth, it felt like shaped glass, but hummed with strange magic.

His warm knuckles traced her cheek, startling her teeth closed. She fumbled his arm away in the dark and painted a scowl across her face.

"Are you done with the games?" she hissed breathlessly.

"Nearly," he replied. "Free yourself, if you're so inclined to fight m--"

Needing no further permission, Caliya tore through the arcane veil, Dispelling Divayth's power with keen excitement and just a touch of satisfied malice, having finally pinned it down. Sunlight seared her eyes, but not from above. Unprocessed brightness bounced off the ground below, quavering in wide, shining sheets.

No.

That wasn't ground at all.

"...Water."

The astonished whisper escaped without thought. She stood before a slender banister of translucent pearlescence, pure magic shaped by crystals reacting to their presence, and looked out over a sprawling seascape. More water than she had ever seen in her life flowed far below, lapping lazily at the shores of the tiny island Tel Fyr was perched upon. An ocean as far as the eye could see, dotted with hundreds of jagged, gray rocks. A forest of giant mushrooms in mottled browns and thick, tubey reds studded their facets and planes between a scattering of sparse-leaved, twiggy trees, lending stark but stalwart beauty to a gleaming midday tableau. Creatures crawled and glided and swooped among them, too small to identify at a glance and nothing at all like the flat illustrations from her guidebooks.

Caliya braced herself against the banister, solid as brass despite its gossamer spindles, and peered straight down. Tel Fyr itself twisted into the ground below, formed from great ribbed bundles of pinkish-yellow and surrounded by swirling green vines thick enough to walk on. In fact, a Breton in similar robes to Aryon was doing just that not far off, following the flattened path upward with perfectly unbothered steps. Where the curving stems rested against the tower's walls, round doors had been cut or possibly grown to allow ingress.

Other workers bustled about the base of the great mushroom, a mix of races alongside strange beasts of burden that might be...guars, she guessed. And nix-oxen, perhaps? They were so much more stunning than any picture could do justice. She couldn't begin to imagine them up close.

Real animals. Live creatures. Almost close enough to touch. She had half a mind to climb down there and do just that.

The scholar raised her eyes. Above hung a heavy spore cap, erupting from the tower at a jaunty angle, the source of their current shade. The azure sky spread beyond, uncaged by a god's Celestiodrome and more than a little daunting in its sheer breadth and utter emptiness. Far off to the distant right rose what could only be the storied crest of holy Red Mountain itself, looming over the mainland and shimmering indistinctly in a haze of its own making. An ominous laval glow coated its crown and streaked its sides with ribbons of red and orange. Power poured from the volcano, its sheer mass and magnitude tinting the aurbis with a unique heat that whispered strange comfort against her soul. The fungal shelf Caliya stood upon extended beyond the opening that led to it, and the scholar followed it around to face the homeland of the dark elves in reverent silence.

Ash and salt carried on the wind.

Sunlight warmed her to the bone.

She closed her eyes and breathed.

Tamriel.

Morrowind.

Vvardenfell.

She was really here.

Darkness consumed the aurbis as Divayth followed her around the mycotic balcony. The weight of his hand covered her glove. Fingertips traced her back, finding skin between collar and corset.

"Magnificent," she heard him murmur.

She raised her eyes again to that distant peak.

"Isn't it?"

He chuckled. "Not the mountain, Ms. Derynval."

Caliya glanced at him. He was standing too close, as always. Thousands of years of ancient power, singularly focused on her. She shifted free with a small sigh, but she couldn't summon the negativity to be tired of his antics. It all felt too perfect. Too dreamlike. She just couldn't be mad here.

Again he stepped closer, incorrigible as ever. "I'll chase you all the way around this balcony if I must," the wizard teased, drumming the banister crisply. He nodded at something beyond her. "A bit more nervous sidling that way and you'll have a view of Sadrith Mora, in fact."

*Sadrith Mora--?*

The scholar's head snapped right, scanning the horizon to the north. A few steps around the curve of Tel Fyr and sure enough, there it was, a distant island and a swell of exotic mushrooms and wild vines sprawled across every inch of dry earth they could find. More lone Telvanni towers and the broken, purplish blocks of ruins rose from the water between here and there, each one jealously guarding its spit of land from the encroaching sea.

"So this is the Zafirbel Bay," she realized, orienting herself quickly now that she had a landmark to work with.

"Very good," Divayth replied, coming abreast of her once more. He nodded toward a particular spire of mushrooms in the distance. "And that would be...?"

She knew this one.

"Tel Aruhn."

When he didn't confirm her answer Caliya glanced back, and immediately wished she hadn't. Dark approval glimmered in his eyes. She pressed her lips together to stop a smirk of pride, and looked away to hide her attempts to quell it. He leaned around her, seeking her gaze. She turned her back to him.

For a moment she thought she'd won.



Until fingertips traced her upper arms.

"I was right, you know," he purred in her ear. The warmth of his chest pressed against her back, far softer and more comfortable in his silk robes than the Daedric shell he'd worn yesterday. "I knew you could be beautiful."

Heat flooded her cheeks. She flinched out of his touch and faced him, straightening her shoulders.

"A cleaning and a fresh coat of grease can make even the ugliest gears shine," she informed him flatly, willing her skin to stop prickling from the memory of his nearness.

"Are you still afraid of me?" he asked mirthfully, flashing predatory teeth. "I thought we'd done away with that notion now that your 'Last Day' business with Sil is concluded."

The reminder of yesterday's events did her nerves little good. She dropped her eyes to her glove, feeling the brass joints beneath.

"About that..."

The scholar covered them with her right hand and looked away, but relented when he offered a palm. She let him slide the guarskin off and expose the augments to air. They were sensitive to sunlight, feeding heat up through her arm as they warmed quickly in the bright shine.

"Go on," he encouraged, smoothing his thumb along the polished metal. "Did you have something to say about it?"

There was something pleasant in his touch. How gentle it was. Unsettlingly so. She glanced back at him, watching the wizard inspect the delicate pistons and tiny sprockets that powered the digits.

"Besides that I'm angry with him?" she replied quietly. When his eyes -- and a brow -- lifted, she met his curious gaze. "I owe you an apology," Caliya added. "I haven't figured out why yet, but he..." She struggled to put it into words. "Lord Seht didn't *lie*, exactly. But he knew I thought I was dying last night. He's always known I'd misinterpret his words. So I'm sorry, for acting the way I did. For being so suspicious of you. He just meant..."

She trailed off a second time. He'd just meant...what? What did the Father of Mysteries mean? She was sure he'd told her, but the memory was muddled. Fractured. Missing key pieces. A haze of pain had bled the substance from his lecture. It worried her. Lord Seht said quite a few important things while Divayth was away that she...just couldn't remember.

The wizard nodded, resuming his interest in her brass. "Well, if I know one thing about the Apostles and their precious god, misinterpretation runs rampant through the ranks," he replied nonchalantly. "One might even say it does so 'gleefully.' You're hardly to blame, Ms. Derynval."

"I'm not at all to blame," she agreed quietly. "Obfuscation is his specialty."

And it always had been. Maybe she *was* to blame. She should have known it wouldn't be so easy, after all. Nothing was simple with the Clockwork God. But her confusion had served a purpose, too. She just had to figure out what that was. And remember what he'd said. Maybe he *had* told her why he'd let her believe a lie.

No. That didn't sound like Lord Seht at all.

"I'm not an Apostle anymore, either," she added. "Not that it matters much, out here."

That, she remembered. Excommunication from the ranks.

"It matters not at all," Divayth replied, encircling her wrist. He held it aloft and bent the tip of her index finger, studying the joints curiously. A brownish-orange mist threaded through the components, sloughing from his skin. Her brass resonated in tonal harmony, and with such sudden strength that its vibrato flowed up her arm and across her shoulders. A ripple of lines and runes glowed white in its wake. Pure reflexes pulled her arm free and forced a quiet gasp from her throat.

His eyes were quick to follow. "Pain?"

"No."

Not pain. Something else.

Like if her nerves could sing.

Amusement danced in the wizard's gaze as he spotted the color in her cheeks. "I'll be the first to admit my distaste for the Clockwork practice of self-mutilation as an act of worship, but this

wasn't your choice, yes?"

"That's right," she agreed, only reluctantly allowing him to pry the limb from her chest again. That was close enough to the truth, at any rate. "Do me a favor and don't do that again."

"Come now," he argued, hovering another ring of earth-tone magic around his palm, "you must be curious to explore just what Sil did to you."

Her brass began to thrum again. She invoked its power exactly as she had Lord Seht's ambiance in the Radius, ensnaring and dispersing Divayth's uncast spell with a puff of divine light.

"Yes." Her tone was decisive. "When I have a moment to myself. Later."

She hoped that would be the end of it, but something cold edged the wizard's stare, like a whisper of frost on a pane of glass. His eyes didn't quite lose their playfulness, but they did gain teeth. "Oh, do share, are you intending to gather a series of mirrors for a lengthy self-inspection? Or might I ask you *again* to abandon this charade of chastity for the sake of knowledge?" he asked. "Your Clockwork God isn't watching anymore, Ms. Derynval. And frankly I would like to know what my colleague found so important to inflict upon an undeserving young academic in such a brutal and violent fashion."

Caliya thinned her lips. He was right, and she wished he wasn't. It *would* be a tedious waste of time to figure it all out on her own. Especially when he was here, curious, and willing to assist. Certainly Sees and Gazes wouldn't be able to read magic like this. And why was she putting up such a fight, anyway? He'd said it himself -- her lingering suspicion no longer had any explainable foundation.

She exhaled and looked away, eyes tracing the silhouette of Sadrith Mora on the horizon.

*Your Clockwork God isn't watching anymore.*

The sentiment bothered her more than she expected it to. Total freedom stared her down, the future a great, emotionless factotum offering no guidance or help. The illusion of choice, no longer an illusion. She could no longer trust that her path was the best one.

"...Fine," she caved, looking down at what was left of her hand.

The sharpness promptly disappeared from her company's expression, replaced by a pleased smile.

"Very good. Now hold still," he instructed, stepping behind her. She felt his hands at the back of her neck, undoing whatever fastened her collar in place. She almost reached back to pull her hair out of his way, then remembered she didn't need to anymore. "And enjoy the view, won't you?" the wizard continued. "I didn't have this overlook constructed to keep the splendor of East Vvardenfell to myself."

No. He wanted to share it. All this majesty. This variegated aurbis. This diverse, unregulated beauty. He hadn't just left her to her own devices in a strange world. Not like damn near the entirety of the Brass Fortress. He was here beside her, just as much a part of the moment as she was. An old traveler guiding the first steps of a new pilgrim. She watched the tides below as the thick fabric slipped free. Tamriel's sun warmed her back, doing quite a bit to chase away the troubles clouding her mind.

Maybe she didn't have to worry. At least, not for now. Divayth was right, she didn't have her Clockwork God anymore.

But she did have the wizard himself.

And Divayth was nothing if not...attentive.

He draped her collar over the edge of the glimmering railing and smoothed his palms along the scholar's bared shoulders, urging her to lower them and relax.

Zafirbel Bay ebbed and flowed. Strange beasts cried out and chattered restlessly. A warm breeze played with her hair. Red Mountain shimmered in the distance. The bright aurbic currents of Nirn Above eddied her soul, mixing color and texture into her company's rich might.

Caliya drew a breath. She fixed her posture. She rested her hands on the glimmering rail.

And she enjoyed the view.

## Chapter End Notes

\*Breaks entire keyboard\* oh my gOD I'm sorry this took almost two months. You would not believe how hard it was to get these two to walk across the fetching room. I had to write and rewrite it...damn, idk, probably 10-15 times. And then I took a big break and wrote something completely different. And then I came back and had MORE problems with it. Every damn time, Divayth was being a cutesy Blinding/Slowing bitch unprompted, and Cali pitched an absolute fit the second he Blinded her, and the fic ground to a halt. OR Cali just raced anticlimactically across the room and we had TWO giant descriptors (room and outside) back-to-back, with Divayth missing out on her look of wonder altogether as he leisurely strolled behind. It took basically this long for the idea to occur to me that Caliya could literally call his bluff and Divayth could be like "aight bitch, here. you lose sight privileges. any further requests?" and Cali could be like "ah shit, I did this to myself" and it could work.

\*Takes breath" \*Giant sigh\* I'm legit mostly glad that this chapter is finally done. I realize it's a bit rocky as well, and probably a bit disconnected from the previous chapter and I apologize for that, but I'm a little rusty. And yes, these are Morrowind-era Telvanni towers with their giant walkable vines (because I've always loved that concept and I'm sad it's not in ESO), with ESO-era graphics so it's not just weird mustard-brown sponge texture. And also, yes, nix oxen. I know they're not actually domesticated in Morrowind but my favorite mount in-game is the fabricant nix-ox, and I love the idea of the dunmer using it as a horse. Because Guars are like mules (or regular earth oxen), and so there's really no riding animal native to the dark elves otherwise (besides the giant silt striders which are really more like if H.P. Lovecraft invented the Miyazaki catbus), and the nix-ox is the perfect size and bug-themed thing for them.

And because it's my fic, so I get to make the tweaks.

Anyway thank you all for your patience. Sorry this took so damn long. I'm still here, still thinking about these two doofuses, and still writing. Please enjoy the beginnings of Cali's slow evolution from a Lonely Hermit Elf into a Happy Tower Elf. I promise Divayth is not going to have any further success any time soon, even with this new version of her. ;) And woo-hoo, 1000 views! <33

# Decrypting the Ritual

## Chapter Summary

Out on the balcony, Divayth interprets the enchantments Sil carved into Caliya's flesh, and makes a few strange discoveries about the nature of her new augments and the abilities she's been equipped with.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There *was* a woman in there. She was wide-eyed, full of wonder and breathless adventure, and Divayth was determined to draw her out. A new backdrop and a few accent pieces seemed to have settled her tremendously from the trauma she'd suffered at her god's hands, and her performance in front of Aryon had proven that there was much more to her than met the eye.

Divayth took the scholar's half-brass hand and attuned his power to its tonal patterns once more. Child's play, considering they matched Sil's perfectly. The effect was instantaneous, a consonant feedback that drew her soul back to the surface of her skin, once more illuminating the lines and glyphs engraved upon her arms, her shoulders, across her back and elsewhere. So much work the sorcerer had done in so short a time, and by memory alone, no doubt. Perverse, yet undeniably excellent execution.

Her breath stuttered as she endured whatever sensation accompanied the resonance. The scholar glanced down at her palm in his. She closed her eyes for quite some time, then looked away without comment. He believed her when she claimed that it wasn't pain. Her prior blush was all the proof he required.

A spell gathered within the scholar. He prepared to bat her energies aside, but she traced the balcony's guarding enchantments and lifted a section of the handrail from waist to chest height, then leaned her forearm, and herself, comfortably against it.

Settling in.

Promising.

Freed from interference, Divayth inspected Sil's handiwork at his leisure. Two clean cuts to remove Ms. Derynval's index and middle knuckle marked the seam where flesh met brass, and the entirety of her thumb had been replaced at the wrist. Her severed tendons and the generative cylinders they were connected to glowed like the spokes of a wagon wheel. Ingenious, if disturbing. No less so than they had been last night, despite the morning's cleanliness. How this caused her no discomfort, though, he intended to find out. The wizard spread the back of her palm, reading the glyphs and sigils painted thereupon. Most of them dealt with tonal conversion, unsurprisingly. Sil ensuring that the divinity within his cast-off detritus would play nicely with a lesser mortal soul. A basic step, and one Divayth himself would have considered necessary, had he any interest in developing his own brand of ghastly "upgrades" like the ones his cohort enjoyed inflicting upon perfectly reasonable monsters and mer. But it worked both ways, he realized as he followed phrasic structures and grammatical clusters over her wrist and toward her elbow with patient, provocatory fingertips.

"Hm. He's made a living soul gem of you."

Of course he had.

The scholar's gaze dropped to her own arm. She looked from it to him as though uncertain whether to comment. Smart girl, she was learning. But he wouldn't mind her input, so long as she didn't try to stop him again.

"Here." Divayth didn't expect the woman to follow, but he underscored a length of runes winding its way down the outer edge of her forearm. "An encouragement, of sorts. To guide the flow of your power. And a rather dangerous one, if any other hand than Sil's had crafted it. Or mine."

She tugged as though to bring her arm closer, but when he kept his grip, the scholar turned to face it instead, and peered over its edge to see what he was talking about. More of the sorcerer's handiwork wound its way up the left side of her neck and clambered over her cheek to ring one eye. Echoes of gore flashed through the wizard's mind as a flat frown briefly graced her luminous brow. She sucked her teeth.

"Of course it's upside down," Ms. Derynval muttered, surprising her company. But perhaps he should have anticipated this. Not many knew Sil's preferred aurbic script, let alone could recognize its directionality at a glance, but she would be one of the few. "What are you showing me? This?" the scholar added, tugging at her skin.

He held his tongue, allowing her to draw her own conclusions. As she pieced everything together he studied the structure of the sorcerer's inscriptions winding across her face. Sil's crisp scribbling betrayed a distinctive craftsmanship, as ordered and precise as one would expect from a grandmaster artificer. His love of bold, pseudo-dwimeric angles splashed itself across the woman's skin, as well as his unique decorative tastes. All of the necessary components were there, of course, but purposeless gear-teeth overlaid clean circles, and reticulated geometric chains decorated what could have been empty space, cluttering an otherwise flawless artistry with the unmistakable signature of the Tribunal's Magnus. The scholar had been marked and marked well -- claimed almost jealously by her god, if Divayth could ascribe intention to such a thing. How much time had Sil wasted on this functionless ornament? How much more pain did he force his adoring prisoner to endure for the sake of his assertions of ownership? The sorcerer's scarlet-stained robes and grim headsman's demeanor were not a sight his peer would soon forget.

The scholar's interest shifted further up her arm.

"I understand you're used to working alone, Ms. Derynval, but do share your findings," Divayth prompted when it seemed she had no intention of speaking.

"You're right," she agreed immediately, wetting her lips. "I see what you mean." She nudged his hand off another phrasal cluster following a stepwise diagonal above her elbow. "He's pulling power from me, keeping the augments charged using..."

"Using your soul," the wizard finished. He regarded the brass with something approaching pity. "I wish you luck applying that hand to any practical spells."

"I think I'll manage, muthsera," she replied smoothly.

But would she? According to the rest of the aurbic sleeve chiseled into Ms. Derynval's arm, Sil had torn a ribbon from her spirit and sutured its frayed edges directly to the artifice. These improvements weren't merely replacements for her fingers, they were extensions of her magic, and supercedent to her own authority thereof. The scholar had no manner of regulating how much of her strength could be taken if the digits decided they had a better idea for it, not without an ability to compartmentalize uncast power that rivalled the older Psijic masters. She was good, but few were *that* good. And he'd already seen it happen once, hadn't he? "Seht's Keys" were prone to this very sort of aurbic embezzlement, even when used properly.

It answered his question, however. Concerning her discomfort. The brass and its attendant arcane scaffolding simply treated themselves as a part of her body. Convinced her that they belonged. Did all the Apostles sacrifice their self-dominion in such a manner? Or did augmentations of a less-than-divine origin not require such heavy magical support? Truth be told, it annoyed the wizard that Sil had successfully piqued his curiosity about these things. He had been more than happy dismissing the practice wholesale.

The wizard watched her pore over the ritual as best she could from an awkward angle, wondering how much she could glean. If she knew what her god had done to her, it didn't seem to upset her. At least, not any more so than she already claimed to be.

"Courageous of him," Divayth commented, "to spill his secrets so openly."

The scholar's eyes met his. "Openly? I don't plan to walk around glowing like an overcharged construct, Lord Fyr." Despite everything, she smiled. "Unless you mean to tell me that *anyone* on Tamriel can contraflow an artificer's unique frequencies."

She was taking all of this rather well. Perhaps it would be best not to spoil the day early. He'd already convinced her to lay down arms, and if she wasn't about to fret over Sil's claim staked upon her soul, far be it from him to do so, either.

"Even if they could, they'd have an easier time controlling a Daedric Titan than they would holding *you* in place long enough to decipher anything useful," he responded. Azura knew he'd worked hard enough for this rare glimpse. "Perhaps there's no safer place for a god's hasty guar-scratchings, now that I think of it."

"Charming, muthsera," the scholar replied.

But her humor didn't fade.

Other, more benign discoveries awaited them elsewhere. Mostly prophylactics. Adjustments to ease the scholar's transition from a tightly-regulated and reasonably sterile upbringing to the wilderness of Vvardenfell. A nutritional booster adorned her right shoulder, perhaps for all those strange Dunmeri meals Divayth was itching to feed her. The linework gilding her face decoded to a soul ward, resistant to breaches by alien magics -- no doubt anything that wasn't Sil's own, of course. And the wizard's personal favorite bit of considerate savagery -- disease resistance -- had been strung like a branding necklace across her chest.

"He's granted you the immunity of an Argonian," the wizard chuckled, tilting her chin upward as she turned to face him. "Kind of him to keep rockjoint and swamp fever at bay. I suppose it would be an inglorious end to all of his hard work if his rising star was bedridden with rattles for three weeks. Although..."

A strange set of sigils cascaded down her right collar. More malady preventatives, at first glance, but with an amplification far beyond what she might require for even the fiercest of the northern ash blights. He turned her further, wondering what sort of filth Sil could possibly expect Ms. Derynval to get herself into that required such a heavy constitutional vanguard. Was he expecting her to catch something from Oblivion? Attract the attention of Peryite, somehow? The wizard frowned at a word even he didn't recognize.

"I understand you're used to working alone, Lord Fyr, but do share your findings'," the scholar mocked in his patrician dialect. A silent challenge met his lifted gaze, drawing a smirk from the mer. She was lucky her sharp tongue came encased in such an attractive exterior. The fresh air and natural beauty of Tamriel were doing her good, after all.

"How well can you read his writing?" Divayth asked.

She held up a shining palm as though admiring a ring. "Oh, like the back of my hand, I'd say."

"Yes, very clever," he dismissed with mild amusement, summoning paper and a quill from one of his studies. He wet the tip of the latter with his tongue. "There appears to be an unusual morpheme lodged in this particular phrase," the wizard added, copying the symbology from the scholar's skin, "and considering your immersion in Sil's world, perhaps you'll have a better chance at identifying it than I do." He showed her the page, and tapped one particular string of characters with the aft end of the feather. "Have you any idea what this is?"

Ms. Derynval looked at it, but only briefly before something seemed to catch her attention. She turned nose to the wind and drew a deep breath, staring at nothing in particular. A flicker of irritation threatened to spark a sharp rebuke from the wizard until he caught the scent as well. The wafting aroma of kwama eggs and roasted greens curled through the open arch.

Ah.

"Do you smell that?" the scholar asked.

"That would be our lunch, Ms. Derynval," Divayth informed her with a smirk, "which I will bring you to *after* you've taken a look at this."

An annoyed but ephemeral scowl creased the scholar's brow. She took the paper from him with an impatient mutter.

"You're really going to hand me a piece of contextless ritual and ask me to..."

He watched her toy restlessly with the sheet's edges, frowning at the very word he'd failed to identify as well. It seemed almost a spelling error, a mis-transliteration of the concept for "body" or "flesh," but such a thing would have been a spellbreaking inaccuracy. And yet the power flowed, unharried by this apparently-correct phrase.

"As much as I'd revel in discovering one of Sil's mistakes, it seems uncharacteristic of him, no?" the wizard prompted.

"Mistake? It's not a mistake," Ms. Derynval replied, shaking her head. She looked from the paper to him to her shoulder and back. "Is there a blight called 'Corprus'?"

"None that I am aware of," Divayth replied, narrowing his eyes. "Perhaps it's some foreign disease."

"Something he's very worried about," the scholar half-muttered. "I've never seen such strong language."

The wizard concurred, but he did so silently. The sorcerer's grammatical structures invoking guardian magic against common ailments were shamanistic hand-waving compared to the rigid defensive arrangements against this "Corprus" blight. And they seemed to solicit divine bulwarks, not merely arcane wards. But why? If such a thing were so necessary to protect her with, shouldn't he have heard about it?

Perhaps the disease took on a different name outside Sil's personal lexicon. Hopefully he would remember to ask the mer about it, whenever they next met.

"Well." He took the paper back, and banished both it and the quill from the balcony. "I suppose further research can wait, for now. Lunch, then, Ms. Derynval?"

*That* caught her attention.

## Chapter End Notes

Quick little update today. Thought I'd throw another Morrowind Easter Egg in there, too. I have a sort-of headcanon that Caliya survives all the way up until the events of Morrowind, and that Divayth's strange interest in the divine disease is sparked by this centuries-old warning that Sil left behind. And yes, I thought for a stupidly-long time about how to handle Caliya not getting every sickness on Tamriel all at the same time within three days of being there because she has zero immune system from the arid sterility of the germless Clockwork City.

Also I went back and reread the last few chapters starting with Sil's PoV and yikes, I low-key forgot how gruesome all that had been. And how low-key mad/perturbed Divayth had been about it. But it's a new day and hey, Cali's a resilient kid, eh? Or something like that. I wholly intended to get them inside and eating in this chapter (because I wanted it from Divayth's PoV because I REALLY don't want to sit there and invent whatever the hell scribe jelly tastes like,) and then realized that I didn't have to do that just yet. Sometimes we just need little chunks of intensive arcane techno-babble to move things along. But that should be the last one for a while, though, I think. I'm running out of weird, obscure adjectives to litter my explanations with, anyway.

And who says we can't have back-to-back Divayth chapters, anyway? :D

# A Transcendent Meal

## Chapter Summary

Caliya's first day on Tamriel continues, with lunch and a reunion with Aryon.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

At just one bite, the scholar went deathly quiet. Divayth allowed her to savor her first taste of Tamriel in peace, making a spectator's sport of her reactions. The table had been spread with unusual artistry, each dish set in the tower's finest glazed-bone imported from the Valenwood and accented with small bursts of colorful flowers, and he suspected the twins were to blame. The pair of scaleskins hovered by the hearth, conferring in their strange, silent body language as they too watched Ms. Derynval begin her meal. The sacrilege of Green Pact tableware surrounded by -- and serving -- butchered flora was not lost on the wizard, but an ignorance of continental décor that would drain even the Silvenar's placid cheeks was to be expected from marsh slaves. In fact, it deeply amused him to think that his banquet table could start a war if the wrong eyes took notice.

As the silence stretched, the twins grew fidgety. A sign of nervousness in their kind. It didn't abate as Ms. Derynval speared another fluffy forkful and stared at it and the yolk pooling beneath it for a long time before laying it on her tongue.

Her eyes closed in silent reverence. Divayth smoothed down his goatee, thoroughly enjoying himself. His dining companion was quite clearly having a deeper religious experience with a poached kwama egg than she'd ever had in Sil's presence, and it was taking a tremendous amount of the wizard's self-control not to shatter the moment with a stifled laugh.

"--Is something wrong with the food?" the pierced member of the scaleskin duo finally blurted, earning her a sharp elbow from her more sensible half.

The scholar gave no verbal reply, choosing instead to shake her head and cover her mouth with a fist. Her shoulders quivered.

The Argonian took a half-step forward. "If it is undercooked, we can send it back to--"

"The meal is fine," Divayth interjected, fixing her with a cool stare, "and if you speak again out of turn, I am certain I can find something less pleasant for you to do elsewhere."

"Aren't *you* eating something, muthsera?"

While the help remembered its place, Ms. Derynval's hoarse whisper turned his head. She was blinking quite a bit, in that way women did when they were determined not to cry. Vaermina's spindles, how she could flip between sharp and delicate so quickly was breathtaking.

"Nevermind me, dear," the wizard urged softly, "this is a significant moment for you. Savor it. I daresay you've earned it."

She stared at him like he'd spurted a second head. Something seemed to break inside her. An elbow hit the table heavily enough to jostle everything on it, and she touched her hand to her forehead, stretching the leather of her glove. She'd insisted on putting them back on and asking him to tie her collar back in place as well before they'd returned inside. A quiet sob escaped her, and a single tear dripped to the plate, beading a swirling gray on the edge of the glaze.

The wizard drew a deep breath and offered the napkin she'd bunched beside her glass with a wide, satisfied smile.

"Let it out, Ms. Derynval, you'll feel better," he encouraged slyly. "No need to suppress yourself."

*You've never eaten better, I'm sure.*



And she did. She took the cloth and buried her face in it. While the scholar reckoned with her new reality he busied himself with his own meal, considering the relatively bland taste of it from her viewpoint. He'd wondered how long she'd last, and was impressed that she'd made it even this far. Truthfully, he'd expected the scholar to fall apart at her first glance of the bay, with how enraptured she'd been by his stories back at the Zenith. To handle herself until lunch had been a pleasant surprise, and with any luck this little moment of weakness would shore up her fortitude for the future. There was so much more to see and do.

He'd nearly finished by the time she dried her eyes. The scholar stared down at the stained napkin and the makeup smudging it with unsteady dismay, then looked up and across the room.

"Gazes, I'm so sorry," she actually apologized, unfurling the bundle like a flag of surrender. "I've ruined all your hard work..."

It took a single warning glance from the wizard for the smarter of the pair to clamp both hands around the other's snout. They weren't an expressive race, but that flat-crested glare could have flinched a Dremora.

Satisfied, Divayth eyed Ms. Derynval again. "If you're concerned about your appearance -- and I commend you for that, by the way -- the twins can spruce you up again after you've eaten." He slid her water glass closer. "Besides, I've seen you look worse."

While the comment was, in an objective sense, meant as a comfort, the wizard hadn't expected it to work. But Ms. Derynval seemed to consider the undeniability of his words with a small, sudden laugh, and one that grew stronger when she wove a reflective shard into existence for a brief self-inspection.

"I couldn't ask her to fix this--"

"I would be happy to!" called an Argonian voice across the way.

Divayth gestured at the insolence, seizing an opportunity without looking. "There, you see? They enjoy this sort of thing."

"We do!"

"And that's enough."

A dark glare accompanied his command. More tightly-folded fins and an enthusiastic nod didn't inspire much confidence, but little wonder they were so brave. He really ought to follow through on his threats more consistently.

The scholar sighed as she tried and failed to improve the smear around her eyes with careful but uninformed sponging. "Do you really have to be so mean to them?" she asked. Her mirror shard dissolved into a fading dust as she gave up.

Divayth picked up her water a second time and set it even more encouragingly close than before. "I do. They're here to serve, not lend their opinion to the day's proceedings, and they know this. Now eat. And drink. And stop fretting about foolish things."

She picked up the cup and contemplated its contents briefly. Whatever she wanted to say self-dismissed in a small shake of her head, and she drained the entire glass. From the tranquility that came over her one might suspect the fluid to have soul-cleansing properties. Her deep, close-eyed inhale only furthered this theory.

"Fine. Thank you, as always, for your patience, Lord Fyr." She poked at her meal and watched it quiver invitingly, then looked up at him. "Do you think you could tell me what this is, or am I just going to guess?"

As entertaining as it would be, the wizard was feeling educational this afternoon. In fact, he spent the rest of the meal talking her through everything she was trying, from quartered honeydew to beetle-cheese crumbles to scribe-jelly toast. She seemed to struggle with that last one, as though the sweetness of it -- or perhaps two combined flavors -- was simply too much. He couldn't blame her, though, if an unseasoned egg had reduced her to tears.

Ms. Derynval asked quite a number of questions between bites. Enough to stretch his admittedly underdeveloped knowledge of provisioning, and enough to summon one of the tower's resident Dunmeri chefs tableside to explain to her exactly how dairy products were fermented and just what part of the scribe the jelly came from. The scholar's fascinated disgust more than offset the

irrelevance of her queries, and Divayth had a glass of post-lunch wine fetched while he watched his company's culinary journey with mild amusement. If she was this curious about everything around her, poor Aryon wouldn't be gaining her assistance for the better part of a week.

Speaking of curiosity...

"What is that?" Ms. Derynval asked, catching a glimpse of his dry red in its glass chalice.

The chef rattled off a vineyard and vintage with great pomposity, but the blank stare that met him took quite a bit of the wind from his sails.

"It's expired fruit juice, and you're not having any," the wizard decreed mirthfully. "At least, not yet."

She would be dealing with enough novelty for a while. No need to stagger her about like a tavern wench, not today. He'd learned from the bugsmoke incident to treat perception-altering substances with a bit more care, where she was concerned. He did want her to enjoy them, after all.

Eventually.

With him.

When she'd eaten her fill, Divayth sent her off with the twins to freshen up and digest in peace, and checked in on proceedings with Aryon. The spellwright was arguing with the Imperial personnel recruiter and a Bosmeri financier in one of the halls when the wizard found him, and dismissed the women rather sharply at Divayth's bidding. He seemed not to have made much progress toward their goals in the hour or so they'd been apart, but he did have a number of understandable questions regarding Ms. Derynval and the role she was expected to play, moving forward. They returned to the classification study to discuss the woman until she returned, her face repainted and once again wearing the posture of a young noble.

Aryon was nothing but smiles as she approached.

"Ah, Caliya, I trust you had an agreeable lunch?"

"Agreeable?" Ms. Derynval asked, smiling at the twins as they delivered her and nodded a polite dismissal. She offered Divayth a knowing smirk. "I think I've formed an unshakeable alliance with the local cuisine."

The pair bowed and slipped away without a word.

"I see you've made friends, as well," the wizard commented, watching the scaleskins leave without incident.

The scholar tilted her head in quiet acquiescence. "Despite your best intentions, I'm afraid I have, muthsera."

Aryon chuckled brightly, exchanging a pleasant glance with her. Divayth folded his arms but remained in good spirits.

"I suppose it's for the best. Consider them yours."

He enjoyed their mirrored surprise.

"To own?" Aryon clarified.

"To borrow," the wizard replied. "They'll be her primary attendants." He eyed Ms. Derynval pointedly. "Do make an attempt to keep them in line, won't you?"

She offered a smooth smile. "I make no promises."

Well. *Someone* was in a fine mood. If a good meal did this to her every day...

"Of course you don't," Divayth exhaled with performative weariness.

"They certainly know your tower better than I do, and the people in it," she challenged before he could continue. "They make good teachers."

The wizard smirked. "So would I, if you'd hold still long enough to learn anything."

She rested an arm on her hip in prim defiance. "If you kept your hands and your magic to yourself, I might be more willing to listen."

Oh? She wanted to play games, did she? A hunger that had nothing to do with food stirred within Divayth's chest. He couldn't help a dark smile.

"I've found in my travels that the more senses are involved, my dear, the more likely the lesson is to *stick*."

Aryon very suddenly became *quite* fascinated by the banner on the wall beside them. The

scholar herself also seemed to realize the danger she was toying with. She held her ground, but joined the spellwright in his deferential inspection of the stitch work.

"Consider me thankful that I'm not one of your students, then," she muttered softly.

"So you say."

Their uncomfortable silence amused him for a beat longer before he changed the subject.

"A tour, then?"

Both mer glanced at him. Divayth nodded back at the spellwright. "Come along, Aryon. Parade us about your noble Telvanni construction. Remind me of the excellent amenities you touted so proudly a few months back, won't you?"

Interest brightened the politician's demeanor immediately. "Of course, sera." Doubtless he was both relieved to have escaped the situation, and happy to show off for a guest. Perhaps the scholar would even enjoy his overly-informative prattling.

With a gesture they were off. Aryon took point, beginning right where they were among the sorting stations. He spoke mostly to Ms. Derynval, and the woman promptly unleashed her rabid curiosity on him, asking first about the scraps on the tables, then about the workers picking through them. In fact it took some stiff nudging from Divayth himself to dislodge her from the room, with the promise that she could return and check their work later.

The spellwright led them about Tel Fyr's various floors, stopping by the kitchens, the bedrooms, and other ancillary quarters that supported daily tower life. Ms. Derynval seemed more interested in the architecture than the functions of each space, at least until he brought them into the alchemical laboratory and its attendant botanical shelves, which stopped her in her tracks. A scattering of Argonians were cleaning the sprawling glassware on counters and scrubbing tools in sinks at the direction of three resident alchemists, two Dunmer and a Breton, all of whom straightened up as the tower's master strode in with his entourage.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Aryon greeted genially. "We'll be out of your way in a moment. Just touring a guest around."

Not an eyelash was batted in his direction. Shoulders only relaxed when Divayth himself waved them off. One day, he would craft this statesman-in-training into a properly-feared mage. If Aryon proved himself to be worth the effort.

The guest in question, of course, had no such reservations about her place in the Telvanni pecking order. She lingered by the door in quiet awe at the rather modest growing room beside it and the array of seedlings only just beginning to push through trays of soil. Divayth smiled and touched her lower back to encourage her through the arch, and she stepped inside with academic fascination.

Moisture thickened the air from a recent misting. Dewdrops glistened on delicate leaves beneath the steady glow of crystalline sunlight. Each cluster of seedlings was hand-labelled with chalk on slate, and the scholar looked from plant to name to plant to name, tugging off her right glove to trace the slick edges of the shelves and follow the curves of stems.

As she reached toward the deep purple swell of a young scathecrow, Divayth prepared to catch her wrist. The moment she brushed its thick spines, reflexes and a sharp hiss delivered her arm precisely into his grip. Her head was quick to follow.

"Caustic," the wizard informed her with a knowing smirk, soothing away the leaf's oily burn with a healing glow. "I don't recommend you offer your extremities to everything you encounter without a measure of caution, Ms. Derynval. Not unless you're dissatisfied with your number of remaining fingers. The most unexpected things will happily claim them around here, and elsewhere."

She seemed less than pleased by his intervention. Wounded pride, he imagined. The scholar looked from their hands to his eyes with a small, flat glare.

"Thank you for the advice, muthsera." She curled her fingers around his and lowered her voice. Her gaze flickered over his shoulder. "You know you don't have to follow me around like a tinkerer with his first automaton, right? I can handle myself."

He leaned closer and matched her hush. "Have you considered that I'm enjoying this?"

She didn't flinch. "Yes, I'm sure you *do* enjoy the superiority of catching an idiot in her mistakes, Lord Fyr. Please let me go."

That wasn't at all what he meant but she also wasn't incorrect, a truth that amused him enough to release her. She tried to back away toward more shelves but he caught her quickly, slipping an arm around her waist to steer her back toward the door.

"I'd prefer to finish the tour first," he informed her. "You'll have plenty of time to explore everything in the tower at your leisure later. And plenty of guides from whom to ask your thousands of questions."

Exasperation smoothed the scholar's face as she detangled herself from him and walked off. "You're the one who pushed me in here, muthsera."

"Yes, because I imagine you wouldn't leave without sating your curiosity."

He followed her back out and delivered her to Aryon once more, and encouraged the spellwright to resume his explanation of the alchemical lab. Ms. Derynval behaved well after that, admiring the quality and craftsmanship of the glassware as she tempered the intensity of her scrutiny. The wizard noticed a bit of visible hesitation around his alchemists, however. A prickly annoyance at their curt responses to her handful of questions. But Divayth too had found them a bit standoffish, when they'd first arrived. Fine workers, but rather to themselves. Suited him well enough, though.

The library was their next stop. Ms. Derynval stayed by Aryon's side as he walked the stacks but seemed understandably distracted, her eyes scanning spines in quick succession while she kept stride. Divayth touched her shoulder as the spellwright droned on about organizational systems and material clusters, and leaned close to tease her patience.

"No subject here is taboo." He remembered well her limited selection in Clockwork. "No tome forbidden. Treat my collection well, and you may read as you wish. Any topic, from the mundane to the blasphemous."

He watched her reaction, seeking that glimmer of realization. She offered him a knowing but guarded glance.

"I'll be certain to put your knowledge to appropriate use."

Divayth traced the back of her neck with his thumb. "You may put my knowledge to whatever use you see fit for it, my dear," he countered softly. "The Telvanni do not police your intentions, and neither will I."

She returned her gaze to the shelves beside them. "...Right."

Such measured caution. But her true freedom would take time to sink in.

Aryon's quiet frown caught his eye. The mer looked as if he had just pieced together an unpleasant revelation.

"She's religious."

"I'm not," came the scholar's quick response.

"Unfortunately," Divayth agreed over her. "But we'll break her of that."

Her expression hardened into annoyed defiance. "I am not," she repeated firmly, knocking away his hand from her neck.

The wizard just smirked. "The ending of the words is...?"

"ALMSIVI," she replied with predictable mindlessness. Immediately she realized that she'd failed his test, and her face darkened several angry shades. "Stop it."

"You've been immersed in the world of a god, my dear, you're not even aware of how devout you are," he informed her, reaching up to trace her cheek with the backs of his nails. She caught his wrist, but he caught hers as well. "If you'd like to test your secular resolve, the Daedric Stalk awaits."

The scholar very nearly maintained her poker face. But as close as he was to her, Divayth spotted fine fractures in her determination. Sil hated the Daedra, or feared them, or thought himself their superior. The subject was one of the very few the wizard avoided chatting with his old friend about, and he understood well the absence of knowledge the Father of Mysteries had instilled in his former Apostle. She didn't even know the Princes' names, let alone -- he assumed -- anything

else about them. But she *was* the sort to get herself into places she wasn't meant to be, and she *had* handled his power well in the Caverns. Divayth intended to exploit that little trait of hers until she was free of the doctrinal shackles of her upbringing, and he had a good feeling that the stubborn glare she was giving him would be key to his success.

"Good," she replied, picking his hands off her arm. "Fine. Shall we go there next?"

She looked to Aryon for confirmation. The spellwright looked back at his master. Divayth continued to study Ms. Derynval for a moment longer, then nodded once and led them off.

Perhaps the trick wasn't to tell her what she could do around here, and expect wonder and awe. Perhaps the trick was to insinuate that she couldn't do something, to leave pieces like breadcrumbs, and let her think she was proving him wrong.

How tedious.

He wasn't Sil, after all.

## Chapter End Notes

\*Falls over\* okay I PROMISE we're almost done with the slice-of-life stuff hhhh I just need her settled in and a pattern established and then we can move this damn story along. It just...there keeps being more to do. More to explore. More to explain. More to flirt over. And yes, Aryon is going to have opinions about this, very soon.

Also I know a lot of the actual towers are fairly sparse, population-wise, in the games, but I like to imagine them as their own small vertical villages. Everything a wizard needs is right there in his own tower, supported by a human/elven/beaskfolk infrastructure of slaves, chefs, guards, mages, merchants, alchemists, couriers, etc. etc. etc. All in service of the wizard-lord, to make his or her life easier. So we're also establishing a bit of that. In that sense it's kind of nice that Tel Fyr in ESO, as a raid location, has a full set of shops in the living room and just a bunch of people milling about. It feels about right for a entire mushroom tower.

Also yes I googled "List of Dunmeri Foods" to figure out a reasonable lunch for these two. I've come to the conclusion that Dunmer food is just "normal food, but it comes from bugs and mushrooms instead of cows and plants."

(Also P.S. Gazes is the pierced one. Divayth has no idea what their names are, and no interest in learning them.)

(PPS no I don't know if scathecrow is caustic, I don't think it is, I just needed something to burn our curious little scholar)

# A Breath of Fresh Air

## Chapter Summary

Aryon gets a moment in the spotlight as we take a chapter through his eyes while Divayth continues to introduce Caliya to her new home.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Well. The new hire was certainly an interesting addition to the tower. And Lord Fyr was already hard at work charming her. The wizard hadn't exaggerated in the slightest when he'd claimed that she'd been sheltered; Caliya seemed amazed by everything she encountered. Aryon, of course, had never had the pleasure of "visiting" the Clockwork City, in as far as such a thing was possible to do. He still didn't quite fully understand what it was, or where. It seemed a monastic order of artificers, potentially located on a remote island from which Sotha Sil ruled in quiet isolation. Perhaps he could glean answers from the scholar about the place that Barilzar refused to give. If he could ever pry her from Lord Fyr's grip.

The wizard himself was currently parading a summoned Clannfear about the Daedric Stalk, delighting in the skittishness it produced in his company. Aryon remained by the door and watched from afar. After the scathecrawl incident, the scholar seemed reluctant to directly interact with anything, though eventually she was coaxed into touching the beast's crest.

The spellwright had mixed feelings about bringing another woman here. Not that he had anything against the fairer sex -- he certainly was looking forward to working with her, in more ways than one -- but proximity to certain kinds tended to make his master's mood and behavior even more capricious than usual. And there was something different about this one. Divayth Fyr was nothing if not insufferably confident in everything he did, but even for him, this dogged pursuit was a bit heavy-handed. Stranger still were the scholar's responses to it. She wasn't rejecting him outright, but nor was she particularly falling for his attempts, either. She seemed, at best, resigned to his antics. And he wasn't upset by this lack of response. As if they were very old friends.

...Perhaps they were, Aryon realized. Lord Fyr had visited Sil several times in the past. Had he come across Caliya before? It *would* fit some of their behavior into place. But then, why was the wizard still harassing her? He tended to seek out the new and promising, and lost interest quickly in those who didn't respond in kind.

A mystery, for sure. And the spellwright intended to discover the nature of their relationship. Navigating the treacherous waters of Lord Fyr's tenuous social circle was becoming a specialty of his, and a mantle he wore with quiet pride.

The pair took amiable snipes at one another as they interacted with the beast, though many of their words were muffled by the general bustle of the Conjurers around the room examining soul gems recovered from the strange things in the caves below. The Daedric Stalk was one of the larger hollows in the tower, and uniquely fitted for its expected purpose. Its arches and corded tissues were banded with metal braces painted through with runes to reinforce them, to accommodate the monstrosities Lord Fyr was expected to pull from Oblivion whenever fancy struck. Otherwise, it was about what one would expect from a Telvanni conjurer's hall. Stations for enchanting objects and studying magical artifacts were set up around the periphery, most of them covered in a fine layer of ash and crystal dust that the slaves never seemed able to fully eliminate. More dust and larger, spent shards piled in low-traffic corners around shelves full of boxes of gems, jewelry, and other assorted miscellany that the wizard or those in his employ

intended to work with in the near future. It was one of the first laboratories to be set up along with the Dwemer Hall, and the two were the most populated areas of the tower. Snippets of conversation between Caliya and Lord Fyr floated back to the spellwright above the soft din.

"I do see the irony of this, by the way." The scholar lifted her skirts to crouch as she spoke. She stared the docile Clannfear in the eye, and peeled back its scaly lid with a gloved thumb while Lord Fyr looked on over her shoulder.

"Irony, Ms. Derynval?"

"That my first proper animal encounter in Tamriel is Daedric."

She was quick to shed her reservations, at least. That would be a positive trait when working in Tel Fyr. Fortune favored the bold and so did the tower's master, when it was applied in the furtherance of his goals. Aryon observed the reactions of those around them while he waited for this little diversion to end, as well. A few nearby were sneaking curious sidelong looks at the proceedings, and exchanging puzzled glances. Some had already written off Lord Fyr's sudden arrival for the shallow attempt to impress that it was. Others were taking careful notes, making a learning experience of the unexpected courtship display. Two or three had noticed the spellwright himself, and drifted closer to ask what was going on. Aryon filled them in as much as he could, explaining that she had been brought in to assist with the Abanabi problem and assuring them that the scholar probably wouldn't be spending much time here.

He was hoping to resume the tour when Lord Fyr banished the Clannfear. But when the wizard brought his company to a nearby bookshelf and selected a title, the spellwright ended his chat and crossed to join them.

"Aryon." Lord Fyr didn't even look up as he thumbed through the pages. "How large would you say an Ogrim is?"

"An Ogrim?" Since when was his council required for daedric comparisons? "About the size of an *ogre*, aren't they?"

The wizard's annoyed impatience physically manifested in a tired sigh. "Yes, that's very helpful to a woman who's never seen an *ogre*, either."

*And how was I supposed to know that?* The spellwright regarded Caliya, then considered the exit. "Well, I don't think they could fit through the door, sera," he suggested, nodding at it.

Both wizard and scholar glanced across the room, then at each other. Lord Fyr raised a brow and nodded. "There you have it. Large." He found whatever he was looking for and shared it with her. Aryon could see just enough to realize it was an illustration of the monsters. "Many varieties exist," the wizard lectured, "each tailored to the specific plane of Oblivion they call home. Mostly cosmetic differences, though some are attuned to a specific element. Others have specialized offensive growths such as extra spines or horns. A few have been known to wear protectives and wield crude weaponry as well, typically blunt things like maces or the stout thigh bones of other unfortunates to cross their path."

The particularly loud scratching of a quill nearby distracted him, and he frowned at the offending onlooker, closing his book with an audible snap.

"This lesson isn't for you, go busy yourself elsewhere." He waved the tome in crisp dismissal, then left it on the edge of a desk. "Unless you'd like *me* to find you a suitable task."

The Bosmer in question actually seemed to consider the proposal for a moment before a friend wisely pulled him away. Aryon was grateful for that -- he had a feeling that his own services would be called upon if Lord Fyr had been expected to follow through with the threat. But the wizard simply gathered his party and ushered them out the door and on to the Dwemer Hall.

The spellwright had plenty to say about the place, but no chance to say it. His master grandstanded the final leg of their journey, taking Caliya around the various artificer's stations and the tools on and around them. Much of his world-renowned collection of Deep Elf artifacts was housed in an adjacent room as well, and Aryon admittedly learned quite a lot about them as he tailed the pair in silence. More than he cared to, honestly. The scholar herself seemed appropriately transfixed, given her profession, and her extensive inquiries were met with enthusiastic discourse. She seemed to hold a number of negative opinions about the Dwemer, characteristic of her

Tribunal upbringing, and Lord Fyr delighted in poking holes through the fabric of her uninformed misunderstanding of the race. And when they seemed about to spend the rest of the afternoon poring over the wizard's stockpile of half-working junk, the spellwright attempted an early refusal. He had places to be and things to do, after all. Not everyone could spend the afternoon in the company of an impressionable lady, much as he'd like to.

"No."

No?

Lord Fyr turned away from an inexplicable column of brass and leather and repeated the syllable. "No. You're not excused. Stay here, we've nearly finished. Exercise some patience, Aryon, you've no idea the value of an experience like this. Half this tower would murder the other half to overhear a discussion this profound."

*Then perhaps one of them could be here in my stead.*

"Yes, Lord Fyr."

For an unsettling moment Aryon worried that his tone would draw further ire. A clang and a soft swear turned both of their heads, just as the column deployed a series rods near its apex and began to rotate.

Caliya straightened up behind it and picked a lipstick-smeared screwdriver from her teeth, nodding in satisfaction. "Got it." She studied the movements with a slight frown. "Hmm...Oh, that makes sense..."

The wizard looked the strange thing up and down. "You've got it working? Curious. Now I wonder what in Oblivion that's for," he mused, successfully pulled from his displeasure to frown up at the rods. The two of them fussed at the artifact for a number of minutes longer, exchanging small tools and unfathomable jargon. Aryon settled in to wait it out, mostly annoyed that his master was going to be irate with him for a lack of progress tomorrow because he was forced to sit here today.

Eventually they managed to get the thing to *stop* moving again, and Lord Fyr stroked his goatee ponderously.

"Well. We'll have it brought to the lab for cleaning and analysis. Well done, Ms. Derynval. But I think we've kept Aryon long enough." He smirked at the scholar as they collected their instrumentation and set it aside. "And I'd like to unleash you upon the continent before dinner. Come." He looked from her to the spellwright, and led the way toward the door. "Let's step outside for a bit of air."

Apparently the acquisition of a new search party would have to wait another day.

The entrance hall was just as chaotic as ever, bustling with enterprise yet carrying the hushed solemnity of a catacomb. Caliya's lingering enthusiasm tapered off quickly as Lord Fyr led her past his current excuse for a medical ward -- a handful of wounded suffering on cots crowded into the corner. Stocking a proper infirmary had proven particularly challenging for Tel Fyr, due largely to the fact that the wizard was demanding the permanent installation be built in the very caves that were causing so much grievous injury. He wanted long-term patients shipped off to Sadrith Mora as well, rather than -- as Aryon kept suggesting -- opening and staffing a temporary care facility in one of his unspecialized studies until Abanabi had been cleared. The healthcare stalemate was crowding out merchants interested in claiming a stake in a new tower and stifling Tel Fyr's potential for economy, which was in turn straining the resources available to those who lived here, and warding off potential caravan contracts to deliver to an already-difficult rocky inlet. It was all a series of cascading headaches for the spellwright, but a series he was confident in his ability to resolve, given time and a bit of patience from those around them.

Unfortunately, patience tended to be in short supply around Lord Fyr.

Caliya had to be herded away from the piles of scrap not-yet-carried to the sorting study, and only brief words were directed toward the sealed entrance to the caves below. Tomorrow, she could take a party and explore the Clockwork bedlam, according to her company.

Aryon decided against reminding him that one was not yet ready.

The tower's ground floor entrance only closed at night, to accommodate the busywork in and



around the lowest levels as well as to aerate the hollow for the injured. The workers and servants gave Lord Fyr a wide berth as the trio strode out into the sunlight together and assembled near the shore. The scholar grew visibly restless as she looked around. Her eyes seemed to drink everything in at once, from the sky to the sea to the sand beneath her shoes, and all that walked, scuttled, or grew thereupon.

With a small touch to her back, Lord Fyr released his captive.

“Off you go, then, Ms. Derynval.”

A suspicious frown promptly tinged her glance.

The wizard smirked. “So you *have* learned caution. Good. But you’ll be safe here, relatively speaking. I trust you won’t stray very far from the tower, and the House guards are fairly competent at keeping the larger of the wild threats at bay. Nothing else should be much worse than what you faced daily in Clockwork. If you get lost, just look around for the tallest spore cap on the horizon and try to walk a straight line toward it. I think you’ll manage.”

The explanation seemed to set her at ease. Caliya tucked her arms behind her back and looked around with a nod. “How long, then?”

“How long am I allowing you freedom?” Lord Fyr asked. “Didn’t you say I need not follow you about like a tinkerer with his automata?”

His mocking tone didn’t faze her. “Yes, and there’s quite a difference between what I can examine in five minutes versus what I can study in five hours. When do you want me back?”

The wizard studied her keenly. She either failed to notice, or deliberately ignored his scrutiny. But there was a tension growing within her. The guarskin squeaked as she squeezed her own wrist.

“...I leave that to your discretion, my dear,” Lord Fyr decided.

“Then I’ll see you in three days, muthsera.”

And she started off like an unbridled guar, ambling toward the docks and leaving Aryon uncertain as to just how serious she was. He glanced at his master, who simply continued to smirk as he watched her leave. When she was out of earshot, the wizard closed the gap between them and rested an elbow on his wrist.

“So.” His tone was quiet, conversational. “What do you think of her?”

Finally, the reason for his presence, manifested.

What did the spellwright think?

*I think she has you on a short leash, Lord Fyr. And she knows it.*

“She seems quite suited for our purposes,” Aryon opened tactfully. “I’m rather worried about her distractibility, though.” Mostly because he imagined the blame would land squarely on *his* shoulders if she didn’t produce timely results.

Lord Fyr chuckled quietly. “Yes...Though I imagine once the novelty wears off, she’ll settle. Despite appearances, she *can* keep to task.”

Aha. So the mer did know something about her.

“Do you really think it’s safe to let her wander off like that?” the spellwright asked, watching Caliya follow a caravaneer’s nix-ox so intently she nearly stepped off the edge of a pier. “You mentioned that she comes from a sheltered world...”

“Concerned for her safety, Aryon?” the wizard teased. “The woman can take care of herself. And besides, she reeks of Sil. Even a mystic arts novice sitting in a backwater shack in Deshaan could triangulate her beacon of a soul. If she’s not back by dinner I intend to fetch her personally.”

The spellwright nodded quietly, fitting some pieces of the puzzle in place, and outlining the shapes of others still missing. He really was fixated on her. Unusually so.

“You two seem well-acquainted.” Despite his prior impatience, Aryon *did* want these answers, and he was more than happy to indulge his master’s desire for conversation to pry them from him.

Lord Fyr frowned at that. “Do we? A curious observation. Though, while I admit, the circumstances of our meeting were eventful, I’ve known her less than a day.”

*Really?*

“She’s quite comfortable with you.”

The sounds of a disagreement floated across the dock. A handful of merchants were attempting

to shoo the scholar away from the herd of pack guar she was now agitating, and she didn't seem to want to leave quietly.

"In what regards?" Lord Fyr asked, watching the verbal scuffle as well.

Aryon exchanged a glance with him, and gave a quiet wink. "Physically."

His insinuation brought a self-satisfied smile to the wizard's face. "Ah. Yes. Though she's yet to reciprocate..."

"I wouldn't worry," the spellwright laughed. "I'm sure she'll come around."

A cool stare chilled his humor.

"Strange. I don't recall asking your opinion on *that* matter."

...*Of course not.*

Three forbid he ever try to connect with the arrogant old mer.

Aryon broke eye contact to fix a wrinkle in his cuff. "My apologies, sera."

"And furthermore, *you* seemed to have quite the interest in her, as well," Lord Fyr needled.

The spellwright scrutinized his tone before responding. Was that genuine irritation, or a test of his resolve? He could flip a damned septim and get about as accurate an answer as any guess he attempted.

"My interactions will remain professional."

A safe response, but the wrong one. As expected. The wizard harrumphed and smoothed his goatee around downturned lips. Aryon was used to that reaction by now. But what did he want to hear? Lord Fyr didn't like diplomacy, but he didn't want truth, either. Or at least he had no qualms offering a scathing character review when it was given. And he'd strike down an outright lie with lightning if it annoyed him enough. There just was no winning, some days.

"May I ask how you met?" he tried, hoping to distract the wizard from his disappointment.

It worked. Lord Fyr studied him briefly, making some personal assessment he'd never know.

"According to Sil, she's a gift. To me."

*A gift?*

The wizard nodded as though he could read his company's mind, or at least the confusion written in the spellwright's eyes. "I don't understand it either. Yet." He glanced across the bay. Aryon followed his gaze back toward Caliya, now standing at the edge of the next island over, examining something in her gloves. "I told you I was visiting the mer, yes?" Lord Fyr continued. "To consult over the caves? He sent me to her. She lived alone, outside his little social experiments. One thing led to another and by the end of the night, she was pronounced mine. Freed from the tyranny of the Tribunal."

*Freed...*

"...Forgive my ignorance, but it sounds like she was enslaved," Aryon suggested.

*And still might be.*

"It does, doesn't it?" the wizard agreed enigmatically. "I'd call that an accurate assessment of her peculiar history." He tapped his lower lip with the side of his index finger. "But that's Sil for you. His sense of propriety is...well, befitting of a god, I suppose. Incomprehensible at best. And the syndrome is only getting worse with age."

The scholar continued to study whatever she was holding, still as a statue by the water's edge.

"She seems to be handling it well."

Lord Fyr nodded. "Yes, of course. She's gaining everything she dreamed of. You should have seen her eyes, Aryon. She lived in a dusty hovel, enormous but neglected. The food she ate, the filth she drank...Well, *tried* to drink. But the way her eyes sparkled at a sip of Odai spring water..."

He trailed off, watching the scholar with carnal approval. Whatever interaction he was remembering seemed to please him quite a bit, and Aryon chose not to disturb his sudden reverie. The spellwright recognized the rarity of the moment, and the value of this strange confession. His master seemed quite taken with her, after all. He would have to tread lightly.

"I'm sure you've noticed she's thin," the wizard commented suddenly.

"I hadn't, actually," Aryon replied.

Yet another swift glance full of cutting judgment punished his accidental sincerity. "Oh, you

like them malnourished, do you?"

...*Why **must** you be like this?*

So much for treading lightly.

Lord Fyr harrumphed when he didn't answer. "She's underweight. We'll fill her out with a few meals. And she's already a powerful mage without them. I expect good things of her once she's properly taken care of. She could do with a bit more gratitude, though..."

"Perhaps she'll show it once the novelty wears off," Aryon sighed, giving up on playing the politician and honestly wondering why he kept trying.

"A reasonable assessment."

Was it?

"I assume she doesn't know that Sotha Sil... 'gifted' her to you?"

Whatever that meant.

"She does."

The spellwright blinked. Had he heard that correctly?

"What does she think of that?"

"I don't know," the wizard mused. "I haven't had a chance to ask yet. She was in no fit state to discuss it at the moment of revelation, I'm afraid." He tilted his head. "But as you mentioned, she's handling it well."

The scholar finally lowered her hands and dropped whatever she'd been staring so intently at all this time. A single leaf. It fluttered away on the ocean breeze and drifted off as it touched the water's surface. She looked up at the nearby branch she'd plucked it from, then approached the giant mushroom beside that, testing the sponginess of its tissue with academic care.

She was handling things well, indeed.

## Chapter End Notes

I think I've figured out what Aryon's doing here. I think he's going to fill the role of "long-suffering right hand man" to Divayth, and Divayth is going to treat him as the closest equivalent to a best friend that the wizard's capable of having. Dragging him around against his will, using him as companion and confidant, battering him with insults when he's ungrateful for the attention, and rewarding him handsomely for his patience and competence.

Sort of the embodiment of "You've told me you want it, now expect to work for it."

...The poor mer.

# A Restless Spirit

## Chapter Summary

Despite a long day of strange novelty, Caliya struggles to sleep, and abandons the endeavor entirely when a rough dream shakes her awake.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*You lift your gaze to a night filled with a thousand, twinkling stars. In wide stripes they wink off and on again as great black bands pass among them. Distant and colossal. Slow and constant. And from that place-between-the-stars, you see a face. The glint of a bronze crest, three-pronged and regal. White hair like a death-shroud and ash-skin around eyes of frozen blood. It looks upon you, and all that you have ever been, and all that you will ever be. You feel yourself driven to your knees beneath the unbearable weight of its terrible stare. World-shaping hands of flawless machinery eclipse the sky and press upon the cage from above. As great bands bend and buckle, heave and collapse, the stars blink out one by one, and they do not return.*

Caliya startled awake with a gasp and a chill. She cast a Light and flinched as it reflected all around from a glimmering, alien web, then took a slow breath, and remembered.

Tel Fyr.

Her new home.

A sheer canopy, hanging from the bed.

The scholar wasn't prone to nightmares. She wasn't prone to dreaming at all. The pragmatism of Clockwork didn't lend itself to flights of fancy like that. But Lord Seht's enormous, disapproving visage haunted the darkness until she pulled back the drapery and let her eyes adjust to the steady glow of the flowers and fruits illuminating her bedroom.

She wasn't going back to sleep. And she really didn't want to, either. Post-dinner restlessness still clawed at her spine and she wanted to work, despite Divayth's insistence that she wait. All this decadence, all this luxury, she needed to justify it. And maybe if he was asleep, he wouldn't be around to bother her.

In the washroom she freshened up, then dug around the wardrobe for a simple outfit that didn't require two Argonians and a wizard to tie herself into. She found a pair of slacks and a tunic that fit well in that mustard-on-brown Telvanni style, with swirling stitchwork and spiral designs. A thick leather vest dyed black and embroidered with the circular Fyr crest, a tool-belt, flexible boots and a pair of less fancy gloves than yesterday's completed the ensemble, and she was glad there was no one around to watch her sigh in annoyance at the outfit in the mirror. Even practical wear was comfortable here. Nothing rough, nothing heavy, nothing draping or dragging. Hems that didn't rasp like wire-brush, seams that followed the bodyline, no fraying metal spindles to poke holes through her sides or leave unpleasant rashes in unpleasant places.

The Provosts liked to proselytize against extravagance in the Fortress. On and on, they'd repeat themselves like vox-cracked factotums about how distracting opulence was. How impurities and ornamentation must be cut from life, to clear one's eyes to see the truth in sequence. And she'd never understood why such a basic, self-evident lesson was so necessary, and so difficult for some exodromals to accept. Why severe behavioral disorders even needed correcting in a few extreme cases. But she'd never known the full spread of just what they were giving up to live there. The extent of the world they had turned away from.

Little wonder some went mad with need.

She stepped into the teleporter and brought herself down to the front hall. Yet another clever invention that would have made her life in the Radius a thousand revolutions easier. To bring herself to the base of her own cliff, and instantly lift her findings back up to her front door? It was almost enough to make an artificer wish she was an enchanter. She didn't expect anyone but guards, and Divayth had explicitly told her that she was free to explore the tower at her leisure, but a few bedraggled healers milled among their groaning patients even at this late hour. They cast her a glance as she passed but she didn't return it. She was here to do something she probably wasn't supposed to, and she wasn't inviting curiosity.

The door to Abanabi was her goal, but those scraps piled around it slowed her pace. Finally, a chance to study them properly. To confirm suspicions that had been bothering her for hours. There was something wrong with them, something strange about all of this brasswork she kept glimpsing everywhere it accumulated, something she didn't want to volunteer without evidence. She bent down by a pile and picked up a curved plate, turning it over and over in her hands with a slow, unsettled nod. Another passed between her fingers, displaying the same stamped evidence. And a third, and a fourth. There *was* something very odd with all of these pieces. Divayth claimed that they came from Clockwork, and some of their workmanship *did* display Lord Seht's signature craftsmanship.

But many didn't. Many were dwemer. Modified, yes, but their roots were unmistakable. And the Father of Mysteries had abandoned deep elf scrap reprocessing years ago.

These were all old samples. Obsolete. Vastly outdated. Even the ones from fabricant chassis were older models, some of them from cruder iterations than the scholar had ever seen in the wild. Even if these were just picked up from whatever lay below and not somehow still alive, killed, and dragged in for analysis, the smallest scrap thereof had no business being here. The Radius factotums harvested all prior fabricants when a new model left prototype -- all of them -- and herded them into the Halls of Fabrication for thorough deconstruction and recycling.

Nothing went to waste. None of these should still exist. They should all be parts of newer factotums and fabricants.

How then, were they filling the caves beneath Tel Fyr?

*That's what he brought you here to find out, Cali*, she told herself, looking up at the door. She set the scrap back into its pile and straightened up, watching the sealing ward glimmer and dance around steel-banded wood as she gathered tools from nearby benches and fitted them into her belt. It was Divayth's work, no doubt. The wizard's signature was a flourish upon any spell he cast, distinctive and striking, like the mer himself. She just hoped that dispelling it wouldn't wake him. He seemed like the type to be cranky if his beauty rest was interrupted.

She'd have to be gentle.

"Master Fyr has the key," a Dunmer voice offered into the quiet. "And so does Daynea."

"So do I," Caliya lied immediately, summoning up her best don't *bother an Apostle* voice. His words sank in half a tick later, though, and she glanced at the mer with a frown. "Who else?"

The healer pushed himself to his feet. The glow from the staff he leaned on illuminated a haggard but alert face. He wore the same sort of robes Aryon did, though their swirling patterns were threaded with light blue. "Daynea Rethul, one of his assistants. Or...maybe a former assistant, I can't keep track anymore. I think he fired her the other week, but she's still around. And she still has a key."

That seemed promising.

"Where is she?"

The healer looked toward the teleporter. "Asleep, I'd wager. As I assume you should be. What are you doing awake? And who are you?"

That was *less* promising.

"None of your business," Caliya replied, turning to regard the cavern entrance again. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"If you're thinking of opening that door, don't," the dunmer advised. "Key or not, there's no one here to defend us if the things below get into the tower."

The scholar scowled at his warning.

“Go away.” She waved him off. “Nothing is getting into the tower. I’ll make sure of it.”

His expression soured from cautious to suspicious. “Perhaps you don’t understand the severity of this situation, sera,” he began. “I don’t recognize you, so you must be new here. There are things beyond that door that defy--”

“I *know* what lies beyond that door,” Caliya lied again, glaring at him. “I am a specialist in artifice and combat, and Lord Fyr brought me here to assist with this exact problem.”

He still wasn’t going away. “A dungeon-delver, are you? These aren’t some crumbling dwemer constructs--”

“I *know* that!” the scholar hissed, struggling to keep her voice down. She rounded on the stubborn mer with upshifted gears. “What part of ‘not-your-business’ are you not understanding? Go back to your sick and injured and leave me alone, or you’ll be joining them, Auxiliary.”

Confusion briefly offset his anger, but a ball of lightning to back up her words broke his resolve. The healer backed away, raising a palm of his own with a white ward ready to spill into a shield against her attack. Too late did she realize she’d called him something probably bizarre, but she wasn’t about to recant or explain herself. It had been too long since she’d had to convince some slip-gearred idiot to stay out of her way, and her pistons were running full-fuel to shut him down.

“Please.” He tried a softer approach. His eyes never left her crackling hand. “We’ve no way to defend ourselves. We’re not fighters. There’s no one down here.”

“I will leave the seals in place when I pass through,” Caliya swore, dispelling her power. “Nothing will get through them.”

“The key deactivates the wards.”

“I don’t *have* a fetching key!” the scholar confessed angrily. “Go back to your corner.”

The healer stared at her in uncertain frustration for a moment longer, then squeezed his uncast ward into a puff of nothing in his fist. He motioned to his fellow medics but backed away, looking from them to her nervously.

“Fine. We won’t stop you--”

--“You can’t,” she interjected, glaring at all of them as the other three rose and joined him. No one looked even remotely about to try.

“We can’t,” their leader agreed, “but we’re not going to protect you, either. We’ve lost many down there. If you want to join them, so be it. Whatever you’re doing in the middle of the night, alone, don’t expect any sympathy. We’ll--”

And...that was about all Caliya cared to listen to. She turned away from them and traced her ears with her fingers, Deafening herself to his noble speech so she could focus. She remained aware of their auras to react in case anyone tried to approach, but she wasn’t going to listen to this self-buffing fool try to tell her what she already knew. Years of fending off unwanted nosiness in the Fortress served her well. She was no stranger to a lack of trust, and didn’t expect to earn any.

The scholar touched her glove to the magic. It was spongy and yielding, but solid. Organic. Disorganized. Like everything else in Tamriel. She was going to have to relearn so much, and learn it all very quickly.

No better time to start than the present.

She couldn’t sense any immediate source or sink. Much like with Lord Seht back home, there was a little bit of Divayth’s power in everything here. It was difficult to tell where the spell ended; it just seemed to taper off into the walls, melding into the structure of the tower itself. Despite her annoyance, though, she was glad for the healer’s warning. She would have to be extra-careful with this. Take her time. Caliya *had* been planning just to unravel the thing and be on her way, but her temporary opposition was right. She had to do this safely, and not endanger the rest of Tel Fyr just because she couldn’t sleep.

The seal was dense, though. Impermeable. There were no holes to poke through and widen, no patterns to crack and exploit. It wasn’t a solid piece, per se, but it was like oil on water. A blended iridescence with no hard edges, just a spectrum that periodically coalesced into clumps before dissolving away again. Its strength seemed to lie in this not-quite-homogeneity, in fact. Like an

ever-shifting net without thread or rope.

But she was patient. And unlocking forbidden doors was her specialty. She set to work testing the composite's pieces, determining their properties and seeking weakness. Something in here would relent, given time. It was just a matter of what.

While her hands worked, her mind drifted back to the huddled healers behind her. She didn't feel bad for how she treated them, though she recognized it was callous of her to speak that way. But people needed to learn to mind their own machinery. Meddlesome inquiry seemed to be a universal irritation.

She didn't expect to be liked much by anyone here, not any better than she had been in Clockwork. That included Divayth, eventually. She'd already annoyed him plenty, and she was certain this fit of generosity would only last as long as he needed her. Or until she stopped being...amusing to him.

Ah.

There.

Two clumps collided, but just before they mixed, they bubbled. Briefly. Barely a moment of hesitation, but enough to exploit.

A strategy began to form.

It took quite a few minutes of focus before she found two "colors" opposing enough to resist blending. Long enough for the healers to relax their guard, and for her to end her Deafen. But she pinned the right clumps and guided them together before they could melt into something new, and held them steady and hardened their edges. Bit by bit, bubble by bubble, she forced them both to coalesce into larger and larger amalgamations until much of the ward was aligned with just these two strains of magic. It was slow and careful work, but necessary to preserve the integrity of the barrier.

And when it was ready, with an exhausting display of magical muscle, she pried apart the seam and slipped herself through.

## Chapter End Notes

Friendly reminder that Cali's not a nice lady, and there's a reason she's not popular with her peers.

Also guess who found yet another in-game NPC to add to the ever-growing ensemble? I stumbled across the Rethul twins, a pair of Divayth's apprentices, while researching...something about Tel Fyr recently. Daynillo is stationed in Vivec City and meant to serve as a "hey Vestige, go check out Tel Fyr something's up" introductory quest, and apparently they both "get to stay there for free" for...y'know, REASONS. \*winks in hot twin\* And Daynea is in Tel Fyr itself and has some cute dialogue about how sparkling and depthless Divayth's eyes are (or something like that) so \*toss\* in the fic she and her sister go as flavor characters to be all dreamy and doe-eyed at him.

# A Touch of Chaos

## Chapter Summary

Upon discovering that his Clockwork prize has gone missing, Divayth takes stock of the situation and recruits help to rescue her. An unexpected visitor joins the effort.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“...You’ve lost her.”

Divayth looked from Argonian to Argonian and back, wondering which he should be angrier with. The simpleton for being simple? Or the supposedly-smarter of the two, for being just as useless?

“W-We thought she was with you,” one of them volunteered.

And when would they learn not to talk back?

“I see. How is ‘what you thought’ meant to assist this situation?”

The pair exchanged a glance and cowered. Their master turned and drew a steadying breath, summoning his armor and his patience. Today was going to be an active day, then. Very well. The black and crimson plate coalesced around his body in a whipping swirl of reddish-purple.

“Enough. Begone. I’ll deal with you later.”

And this time, he would. Wisely, they both scampered out before he could glance back. Divayth adjusted a pauldron and exhaled, then gathered his scrying tools to determine Ms. Derynval’s status.

She was alive. And she was in the caves. That much he could sense. It wasn’t quite a crisis, yet, which was why the scaleskins remained in one piece. But she could be injured, or unconscious, or half-eaten and crawling her way back to the door. He needed a better look at her to know what -- or whom -- to take with him on this retrieval effort.

The short-distance medium was a quick one to whip up, made quicker by the key ingredient he had at his convenient disposal. An amber terebinthine base, a few sprigs of wormwood, a white cap and a half, and some fire salts and sapphire dust to sear it to ash and bind its power. Add to that a few flakes of the scholar’s blood harvested from that robe of hers, and pour it over a tessellated lens about the size of a dinner plate. The solution adhered itself to the glass like a silvered mirror, activating runic enchantments along the rim. Fuzzy shapes within resolved into a deep subterranean forest of scarlet fungal stalks and the back of a slender figure standing over a waist-high rock, working with something the wizard couldn’t see. He drew back the focal origin, widening the view around his newest acquisition as she stood, seemingly uninjured, in the Caves of Abanabi. Scattered all around her were the remains of brass beasts and broken constructs, one or two still sparking. Further off, a white circle of Clockwork magic painted the ground in glowing lines, a geometric sanctuary protecting her from whatever prowled beyond.

Good.

She was fine.

Not that he expected much less, given her demonstrations in the Radius.

*Impressive, Ms. Derynval.*

But a mystery remained. His ward was still intact. How had she passed it without breaking his magic?

Through the lens, the scholar lifted her head and looked around, then glanced behind her. There was something wrong with her eyes, he noticed immediately. Something unusual about her



expression. She seemed pale, somehow. Haggard. A bit...discomposed. Still tired from waking so early, he presumed. Her attention darted about, alert but unafraid, seeking something she couldn't quite see. Her gaze settled on the window through which he watched her, certain and steady enough to tell him that he'd been caught, and she abandoned her makeshift workbench to approach the origin with cold suspicion.

It was a one-way connection, so he knew she couldn't see him directly. But she had clearly detected the magic.

He had half a mind to let her toy with it, just to see what she could do. But she was in a stable situation, healthy and uninjured, and hadn't caused any fresh catastrophes. That was enough for now. Nothing her first taste of coffee wouldn't erase. Divayth severed the vision and peeled the rubbery residue from the lens. He might poke about with the dregs later, if fancy struck. Make some attempt to extract and encode the scholar's essence into a proper locus crystal. He had a strong suspicion that this wasn't the last time she'd go missing, and there was only so much fluid he could pull from her religious rags to check on her when she did.

But not now.

Now he needed to study his door.

A small warp in the air above the desk he stood at disgorged a large dovah-fly. Its glinting wings and telltale ticking betrayed it as a clockwork insect, as did the single sequence plaque weighing down its spindly legs. Divayth reached out to relieve it of its burden, but the pest darted between his fingers and swung its way out the door. The echoing chime of the teleporter followed soon after, leaving the wizard annoyed and bemused.

"...Well, if you think I'm chasing your little pets around the tower like a fool, Sil, I'm beginning to worry about your sanity," he muttered, following the thing at his own pace, in the direction he was already headed before it arrived.

Irritatingly, the thing was buzzing about the entrance when he stepped into the room himself, causing a small scene among the morning workers. He largely ignored it and the chaos around him as he approached his warded door with a frown. As suspected, the spell was not altered or torn in any meaningful way. Echoes of the scholar's passage threaded through the magic, but that was to be expected from--

Something large and clumsy crashed into his shoulder. A spike of annoyance dissipated as he recognized Daynea's hissing "b'vehk!" One half of a charming pair of young Dunmer apprentices, she and her sister had followed him to the tower, and had been studying magic from him long before this mess unfolded beneath their feet. Though, like most, neither of them was proving particularly useful in helping him resolve the current situation. Daynea had gone down into the caves before, but lost her nerve when she realized the extent of the problem, and the damage it had caused. The poor thing was clutching her own arm where it had collided with the spikes of his plate. It would probably leave quite the bruise, at least around the leather joint she seemed to have injured.

"Sorry, Master Fyr," she told him, keeping both eyes on the darting dovah-fly. "But...well..." She trailed off, nodding at it. "Looks like something escaped the caves."

The thing seemed to be hovering around him expectantly, zipping to and fro with its pendulous freight as though hoping he'd open its passage back home. The wizard touched her arm, displacing her own hand as he healed away whatever damage she had incurred.

"Come now, Daynea," he chided, "I understand that the things below unsettled you, but there's no need to be so jumpy. It's just a bug."

His reassurance did little to calm her. She wet her lips and leaned away as it neared, conveniently into his chest. "You say that, but I've seen metal Nix Hounds that spout streams of lightning and...and whatever those snakelike things that curl up into wheels are. Who knows what it can do."

Divayth caught the irritant in an arcane bubble and brought it near enough to inspect, showing it off to his young company. It tink-tink-tink-ed against the walls of his spell, struggling to free itself to no avail. She -- and the rest of the room -- finally relaxed at its safe capture, and he turned

away to consider the door behind him once more.

"You see?" he mused. "Harmless. Good for frightening nervous young women and little else."

"Is it...carrying something?" Daynea asked.

"Yes. Something I'll deal with later."

Sil could wait, after all. If the sorcerer wasn't going to treat his deliveries seriously, the wizard wouldn't receive them as such. He glanced at his apprentice, inspecting her wardrobe. She was dressed for battle in medium-weight armor, as most of the tower was these days. A fact that could play to his advantage. "You're still apprehensive about the caverns, then?"

She looked from the bug to him with a nod, then at the door. "Well--yes. Are you going in there?"

"*Someone* must," he confirmed. "I've a rescue mission to enact. Did you meet Ms. Caliya Derynval yesterday, by chance?"

"Is she the woman you and Aryon were with?"

"The very same."

Daynea shook her head. "We weren't introduced."

That was a failure on Aryon's part, then. The spellwright was supposed to bring her around to key figures of the tower after dinner. Perhaps the Rethul twins hadn't been available so late.

"It seems she's made her way down below, and we need her back," the wizard informed her. He released the dovah-fly -- its constant tapping was beginning to get on his nerves -- and gestured at the door. "But first I'd like to figure out how she got through this barrier at all without breaking the seal."

A few of the more skittish company present scuffled away as the insect returned to its irregular hovering.

Daynea stared. "You're telling me someone's *down* there?"

He waved off her concern. "Don't take that worried tone. She's fine."

The woman's shoulders dropped. "Fine? How is she fine? You've seen what those things can--"

"She's a specialist. She can handle herself."

His apprentice hesitated a beat, processing that information. "People specialize in...?" She shook her head. "But I've never--None of us have ever seen these things before. How can someone specialize in them?"

Her questions, while usually a pleasant quirk, were beginning to lose their charm. The wizard needed to concentrate, something he couldn't do while holding a conversation. Divayth turned his full attention to Daynea and perched an elbow on his wrist, raising a single, pointed eyebrow.

"The creatures came from somewhere, yes?" he asked.

"Obviously," she agreed.

"And that somewhere likely had people?" the wizard continued.

Her concurrence wasn't so quick on that one. "Not necessarily. Dwemer ruins are full of active machinery and no people."

Well well. He knew there was a reason he kept her around.

Besides the self-apparent.

"You raise a fine point. However, I can assure you that where these came from, a subset of mer do call home."

"The Clockwork City, you theorized," she supplied.

"Precisely," he agreed. At least she listened well. "Mer live there. And I've brought one back. Hence, a specialist."

The woman looked back at the door. "And she's in there?"

"Yes," he joined her in frowning at it. "Though *how*, I've yet to determine."

At least the room had settled enough to allow for a bit of focus, now that Seht's Divine Delivery-Fly hadn't done anything aggressive since its arrival. He peered closer at the ward, seeking any disturbance or evidence of tampering. Threads of Ms. Derynval's presence stained his power, but their age erased her methods. They were hours old, he estimated, and nearly faded

away. She'd been down there a while. Perhaps not long after midnight...?

He glanced at the healers nearby. They were in the middle of a shift change, conferring over the status of the recovering.

"Daynea, ask the overnight workers if they saw Ms. Derynval, would you?" he requested. "Perhaps one of them could shed light on this little mystery..."

The woman started off, but hesitated after a step or two. "If she's in there, surely we should be getting her to safety first, and then we could ask her directly?"

The wizard caught her eye with a glint. "'We?' Are you implying that you'll join me?"

She fidgeted and glared at the door, then fixed him with that same look of pleading apology that had preceded her first denial.

"Is...She hasn't gone through the portal yet, has she?"

"No," Divayth replied. "I wouldn't be able to sense her if she had."

*You could know this as well, if you performed those exercises I suggested, rather than this menial gruntwork you insist on completing,* he added to himself. Ever since she'd abandoned the caverns, the woman had been wasting her days tallying up the injured or some such nonsense instead of continuing her studies, no doubt in some self-soothing attempt to remain useful.

But he smiled disarmingly and closed the gap between them. "Come along, Daynea," he urged, touching her arm. "A second pair of eyes will be of great assistance to me. And you know I wouldn't let anything happen to you."

Her complexion darkened pleasantly, and she covered his glove with her own. "I—fine," she sighed. "Just to rescue your friend."

"That's all I ask," he promised.

A hesitant cough interrupted their moment. Arilonwe, a timid Altmer sent over from the mainland, apparently sought an audience. He flinched at a mere glance, but gathered himself up enough to speak.

"Pardon me, Master Fyr, but I couldn't help overhearing—were you looking for that woman who went into the caves alone last night?"

*Ah. A lead. Couldn't have piped up five minutes ago, eh?*

Divayth tucked his arms behind his back. "I am. Did you see her?"

The mer shook his head. "I didn't, but, well..."

He trailed off and nodded toward some of the other healers. A few of them exchanged glances and came forward. All four had seen Ms. Derynval pass—and argued with her about the foolishness of the endeavor—but not a single one among them could tell him how she'd done so. Conflicting reports about meaningless hand-waving and subtle magical manipulation were of little help, and "she peeled apart the layers like an overripe fruit" only deepened his annoyance.

There were no layers.

That was the entire purpose of the spell. A constant eddying swirl of currents meant to eliminate weakness.

*I swear, does anyone read my texts anymore?*

He dismissed them all with a handwave and turned back to Daynea. The sympathetic understanding in her eyes did quite a bit to lift his mood on its own.

"Unhelpful, as expected," he conceded. The wizard gestured toward the door. "Best not to waste more time. Perhaps you'd like to do the honors, dear? You do still have my key, yes?"

She did.

She wasn't happy about it, but she did.

## Chapter End Notes

Well, if we're going to get the abrasive side of Caliya, we might as well catch a

glimpse of Divayth being sweet and forgiving to his hot young twin apprentices, too.

This guy has more layers than an onion.

# Grim Revelation

## Chapter Summary

Divayth embarks on a mission to recover a very ungrateful Caliya from the Caves of Abanabi.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Caliya peered at a verminous helmet, tilting its inner edge against the ruddy light of the nearby stalks. This one's fabricant registry number was warped, too. Deformed. Like it had already been melted down once and pressed back into shape.

Almost all of them were like this.

If they even had a number to begin with.

A kagouti bellowed in the distance, its distinctive, tinny roar echoing off the stone. Not unusual, but the clang of metal and crackling discharge that followed pulled the scholar's attention from the parts scattered around her.

That wasn't a nix hound it had stumbled across.

Someone was here.

The Protective Aura hiding her from fabricants also hid power sources from her, so it was another few minutes before the intruders cleaving their way through the caverns came into view. Based on that strange energy signature she'd detected earlier, she wasn't at all surprised to see Divayth, scattering machines like Vivec's wrath incarnate, cloaked in his own arcane resplendence and chaining thick bands of electricity from one foe to the next in a way she could only dream of. Arcs of power raced the length of his armor, every crisp gesture generating a fresh shower of glittery magic. Two enormous ice monstrosities lumbered at his flank, hurling chunks of themselves at stunned and reeling targets with devastating accuracy. There was a second figure beside him as well, one whom Caliya could have mistaken for a captive at first. A wiry cage of lightning surrounded her, but, upon closer inspection, it seemed to be for her protection, not a prison, attracting bits of the wizard's might and discharging them at anything that came too close.

"Frost, Daynea! Freeze the smaller ones!" The wizard's clear guidance and imperious tone carried easily over the mayhem. A visible chill billowed from the base of the cage and swept along the ground. Two nix hounds leapt free, but a third left behind a piece of its back leg as the cold-brittled brass shattered under the strain.

"Keep it up. A bit faster next time. You're doing well."

If she responded, it wasn't loud enough to hear.

The scholar set down her work, unafraid of the approaching maelstrom despite the vermillion glow and sharp shadows lending it an extra-sinister air. He still needed her, after all, and getting into things she wasn't supposed to was her specialty. But before the destructive entourage could arrive, a strange little herald glided closer and smacked headfirst into the clear barrier around her.

A scintillant dovah-fly. And it was carrying a sequence plaque.

She opened a hole for the insect and took the plate from its legs. It hovered curiously around her ears before alighting briefly on a shoulder, then buzzed down to her forearm as she read the message engraved on the metal.

Or tried to.

The only immediately legible word was "CONTENTS," underscored and followed by a colon at the very top of the plaque. A list of some kind followed, based on structure and format, but

everything on it was heavily encoded in finely-machined glyphs. She turned the plate over, hoping for a key of some kind to assist in decrypting it. The back was smooth and inert.

The clockwork courier twitched, then zipped across to her left hand. Tiny claw-tips squeezed her augments through leather, beckoning to the power within. She tugged off her glove and the insect fitted its legs through her joints, laying flat and still like a gaudy costume ring.

The plaque wasn't enchanted. But the dovah-fly was. She triggered its spell. Incomplete equations glimmered into view on the veined glass of its wings.

The cipher for the code.

*I'll never be free of you, will I, Lord Seht?*

A chunk of ice slammed the sanctuary's wall with a deafening crash, spooking the page right out of her hands. Divayth's power rasped against her ward as he tapped it impatiently with a lightning-threaded hand. Heart hammering on all cylinders, Caliya dropped her focus to the linework around her, and opened a large enough new hole to allow him and his company inside.

"There's no need to scare me like that, a simple knock is enough!" she snapped before she could stop herself.

"You start *my* day off unpleasantly, I think it only fair to return the favor," Divayth replied, striding through. His electric darkness hit her like a blanket of bricks the moment he crossed the threshold, stuffing any answer she might have given right back down her throat. The scholar physically retreated to gather her wits as he dispersed his active spells, alleviating some but not all of the immense pressure he filled her little dome with. The frost creatures outside crumbled apart where they stood. His companion's protective cage fizzled out. Daynea, he'd called her. Daynea Rethul, she must be. The one who apparently wasn't released from service, despite rumors to the contrary. Caliya took a good look at her, mostly to buy more time to recover. She was a young, severe-looking dark elf dressed in plate and leather, and, based on the nervous anger in her eyes, she didn't want to be down here.

Divayth folded his arms as he surveyed his surroundings critically, his eyes and armor still effervescent with arcane might. It would take a while for that amount of magical momentum to settle, and the scholar felt like she was drowning in it. "You better have learned something useful from all this trouble, Ms. Derynval," he continued, undeterred by her silence. "In the future, I'd appreciate it if you caused your disruptions *after* breakfast."

The scholar picked the dovah-fly from her hand and tugged her glove back on, mostly to stop his accomplice from staring at her fingers.

"I *have* found something. I don't know what it means, though," she admitted. A surge of fresh anger replaced her shock as she calmed down and remembered what she wanted to say to him. She channeled her own magic outward, pressing back against that imperious vortex. "You didn't tell me there were bodies down here, muthsera!"

Daynea was the one to reply, however. Indignation widened her eyes.

"I beg your pardon? Who are you to take that tone with Master Fyr?"

The wizard held up a hand. His power continued to churn in great waves, and it pulsed almost physically against Caliya's soul as his own mood likewise darkened. A faint reddish haze began to glow between them. The scholar shored up her fortitude and curled her hand into a fist to stand firm. She wasn't afraid, no matter how imposing he wanted to be.

Although, her protective bubble was beginning to feel like a self-inflicted snare.

"What bodies, Ms. Derynval?" Divayth asked.

*What bodies?*

"The corpses," she hissed, ignoring their impotent company. "There are dozens of dead down here, picked apart and eaten and left for recycling!"

She'd made *that* unfortunate discovery not long after slipping through the door. Vacant dark elf eyes and twisted faces frozen in horror haunted her every blink. Fabricants pulling at limbs, peeling flesh from bones to snap it up. Dwemer constructs meticulously breaking down and clearing away expired mer. Body parts piled along walls when no suitable organic disposal chute could be located. This little nook she'd found was the only one *without* a victim, it seemed.

A scarlet spark snapped along the ground, flinching Daynea. Divayth's luminous eyes narrowed.

"And?"

"...And?" the scholar echoed in disbelief.

The wizard tapped a clawed fingertip against his upper arm, waiting for her response. Caliya searched for an answer, but nothing came. All of her anger, all her bitter discontent hardened to rage.

She just didn't have one.

She didn't expect a concession.

She'd been playing this conversation out in her head for hours, from the moment she'd stumbled across the carnage until just a few minutes ago. Any response she'd imagined from him came nowhere near that simple acknowledgment of fact. And holding off his substantial, compressive arcane weight wasn't doing her concentration any favors.

Divayth remained unimpressed. "I'm certain I mentioned the tragedy of this situation. Or, if I hadn't, I intended to, had you not gone sprinting down here the moment you were left unsupervised. Frankly, I'm quite curious what you expected, giving your apparently-limited understanding of the situation. Look *around*." He gestured at the ocean of machinery clattering beyond the ward. "This was a mere construction site before it filled with the sorts of threats most men and mer have never seen before. Let alone possessed the capability to deal with. The Telvanni provided guards to clear spiders and flush out the occasional shalk's nest, not face down hordes of Sil's finest death-machines. It was quick, bloody, and overwhelming. You saw the injured." He touched Daynea's elbow, careful to withdraw his power from harming her. "We were lucky to evacuate the few survivors that we did. Those less fortunate will be collected when doing so no longer risks increasing their number."

*Sil's finest death-machines.*

A chill was beginning to thread its way through the scholar's veins. She shook her head and struggled to breathe, and backed away until she could lean on the rocks. Her gaze dropped to the piles of refuse around her. Sorted and unsorted. Bloodstained and oil-slickened. Why didn't he understand? How didn't that carnage out there...horrify him?

And...who was *really* to blame?

"They're not Sil's finest," she whispered, unable to summon her proper voice.

"Hm?"

She couldn't even bring herself to repeat what she'd said.

Something was wrong.

*Everything* was wrong.

How could this have happened?

How could Lord Seht have...

Divayth came closer, his proximity squeezing her essence until it collapsed back into her soul. The rapids around him had settled somewhat, but they were no less overwhelming. At the very least there was a familiarity to it. *He* wasn't quite as wild and chaotic as the rest of Tamriel.

"Come upstairs, Ms. Derynval."

His gentle tone lifted her gaze. Power still shimmered in his eyes, ancient and spellbinding. He touched her cheek with careful claws. "I'd rather not have to carry you. You're pale, sleepless, and I assume you haven't eaten in hours. Come."

To his credit, she'd never intended to stay down here this long. She didn't even know how long she'd been here. Hours sounded about right. And her body ached for food, now that he mentioned it.

She closed her eyes, exhaled, and nodded. This place wasn't going anywhere. And she had a lot to think about. They might as well have this conversation somewhere less...deadly.

Divayth turned away to address his assistant. "Ready yourself, Daynea. Remember my instructions. Retreat will be quicker than our expedition here."

And it was. With shaking hands the scholar gathered up the sequence plaque she'd dropped

and a few choice pieces of brass, and dissolved her protective aura to follow the pair back to the safety of the tower. More of those enormous ice behemoths appeared and covered their flank. She looked for opportunities to assist, to make herself useful at all, but there was no need. Between the wizard, his apprentice, and their elemental friends, nothing around them posed even the slightest threat.

All eyes turned as the trio stepped back through the door. Divayth paused to seal it again, then thanked Daynea for her service and apologized to her for matters that required his immediate attention. A quick appraisal of her performance and a vague promise to make it up to her later were enough to send her on her way, and a pointed scowl at anyone else dispersed the most visible stares as he escorted the scholar to the teleporter pad, and brought her right back to the master's overlook.

Somehow, the dovah-fly was waiting for her, settled expectantly on the overflowing desk and making an Argonian attendant across the way obviously uncomfortable. As soon as he spotted the thing, Divayth trapped it under a dome of power with clear prejudice. It didn't react to its new prison, which seemed to rob him of whatever satisfaction he was trying to acquire from interacting with it. The wizard brought her closer and invited her to set down her own burden, taking some pieces off her armfuls of metal and setting them on a few of the upper shelves. The rest she gathered into a small pile on the floor, making sure that no fluids would leak onto anything valuable. The sole advantage of sequence plaques over Nirn books was their stainlessness, after all. Information seemed much more fragile around here than in Clockwork.

She looked down at the plaque in question and convinced Divayth to release the dovah-fly, which obediently zipped onto the back of her glove the moment it was free.

Her body still ached for food.

The wizard led her to the hearth and gestured to the divan, taking the armchair beside it for himself. His Daedric plate disincorporated in a swirl of reddish-purple to reveal a matching black and red outfit beneath, understated in its mystic ornament but tailored to flatter. Caliya stared tiredly at him, pausing the middle of her less-elegant attempt to peel off her tool belt as she watched Divayth settle in and relax.

"Take your seat, please," he invited without looking.

"Where did you just send your armor?" she asked.

"Oblivion."

Oh. He was still mad.

He took a mug of something steaming from his servant's tray as the Argonian approached, and closed his eyes to inhale. Another was offered to the scholar. It was black as used oil but gave off an earthy aroma.

"Thank you," she murmured, swirling it suspiciously. The lizard didn't acknowledge her at all. His expressionless eyes never left the insect attached to her glove, even as he backed away to tend to other affairs.

His reaction didn't bother her. In fact, it was closer to how she'd been treated in the Brass Fortress than most of the interactions she'd had at Tel Fyr so far. The scholar piled her belt beside the chair and sat down to piece together her thoughts and absorb the warmth of the arcane flames. Their gentle heat was soothing to skin and soul alike.

Divayth showed her how to adjust her coffee to taste with milk, sugar and a composure that unsettled her. She couldn't read him at all. She had no idea what sort of mood he was in. A dozen things more important than flavoring some new beverage swirled through her head. The fabricants. The death. The dovah-fly. It wasn't right, behaving so casually when there were such pressing matters below.

"If you're going to be angry with me for breaching your ward, I'd rather you get it over with," she opened, intending to pick a fight.

But he didn't take the bait.

"Have you listened to a word I've said since we met?" he asked instead.

"What?"

She stared down at the now-muddy drink warming her hands.



He closed his eyes and exhaled.

“A promising start.”

Caliya shot him a flat look, but the old wizard didn't notice. The hearth layered his dark skin and pale hair with a pleasant lavender tint as she waited for him to explain himself. Escaping the caverns had roiled his magic again, and its restless currents were still churning through the aurbis like a great tenebrous beast teething at the bars of a cage he was patiently stuffing it back into.

“Nevermind, Ms. Derynval,” Divayth finally decided. “You mentioned that you learned something down there. What was it?”

Well, at least that was *on* the list of things to talk about, even if it might not be at the top.

“Those fabricants shouldn't exist.”

That turned his head. Caliya paused for a sip from her mug before continuing. It wasn't unpleasant, per se -- she'd certainly ingested worse fluids in her lifetime -- but it seemed an acquired taste. Smooth, but bitter. It could use a bit more sugar than he'd been willing to give her. But everything could use a bit more sugar, she'd come to discover.

Sugar was delicious.

“They're all scrap,” she clarified. “Old models, fastened onto new flesh. Too old to exist. They should have been broken down long ago and recreated. And I don't know why there are dwemer things mixed in, either.” She met his gaze. “Whoever's opened the portal down there is putting things back together from a long time ago. I don't know where they'd even get that material.”

“The portal wasn't opened *by* anyone,” the wizard corrected.

“You know that for a fact?” she asked.

He frowned like she'd insulted his mother. “I beg your pardon? You're asking me—Divayth Fyr, transliminal master—whether or not I can spot the difference between a manmade gateway and a natural tear between worlds?” He shook his head and drank, then returned his steady gaze to the hearth. “Of course I know this. In fact the problem would be far simpler to deal with if it *had* a traceable point of origination. A rival mage. An amateur's accident. But tell me more about the machines.” Despite his fluctuating mood, the wizard's lashing power was beginning to settle into a stabilizing series of ripples. He was well-practiced at handling his own might. Not letting it get the better of him. “All dwemer constructs are old. And those in the cavern bear the marks of Sil's tinkering. What evidence do you have of their strangeness?”

“Oh, you get to question my judgment on artifice, but I can't question yours on portals?” Caliya countered into her mug. “Maybe I just know.”

One might think that being tired would shut her up for once.

One would be quite wrong.

“I've written volumes on the subject, Ms. Derynval. If you'd like a lesson in my expertise, you may begin there,” Divayth sighed, waving a hand in exhausted dismissal. “Answer my questions and cease this inane immaturity.”

“I've also written books on constructs—” she started to remind him.

“—Which I intend to read when they are delivered,” the wizard finished prophetically. “In fact I have a rather unpleasant surprise for you at that time. And I believe they're due today, if memory serves. Now, are you finished with this purposeless academia contest? I have a number of other subjects to ask you about and I'd prefer if they didn't take all morning.”

*An unpleasant surprise?*

“What other subjects?”

More visible exhaustion. She couldn't blame him. She'd be exhausted with herself, too.

“I'd like to know what was contained in the message Sil sent you via clockwork pestilence, and how you slipped by my ward.”

*Shut up shut up shut up shut up—*

“Oh, so you can seal it better for next time?”

Divayth offered the flames a pitying glance. “Don't flatter yourself, Ms. Derynval, it wasn't that impressive a feat. I crafted that barrier with the intention of holding mindless beasts at bay. Perhaps you'd like accolades for clearing that particular bar? There are a number of exploitable

flaws in the seal to the caverns. I'm simply curious which one you chose." He looked her up and down. "If I truly wanted to prevent you from meddling with my affairs, rest assured, I'd have no trouble doing so."

*Oh, really?*

"Perhaps you could share some pointers with Lord Seht, then," Caliya couldn't stop herself from saying. The Father of Mysteries hadn't been able to keep her out of anything she'd set her mind to, either.

Her company nodded humorlessly. "I'll take it under advisement."

And he rested an ankle on his knee and waited.

The Clockwork God's words bounced around her head as she bought herself time with a drink. She picked up the sequence plaque beside her on the divan and looked through its coded glyphs once more.

*Your gift is complete, Divayth Fyr.*

He handled her well. Any Apostle would have thrown her from their presence for such overt disrespect. And yet here he was, tolerating her inability to control her smart mouth in his presence, despite everything he'd done for her. Despite finding her in the one place she wasn't yet supposed to be.

"The plaque is encoded," she informed him, tugging off her glove and holding it out to show him. The dovah-fly re-allocated in her augments, and she tilted it his way as she revealed the cipher. "There's the key, but I'll need time to crack it."

He studied both in the firelight, and reached out to touch the insect's nearer set of wings. It twitched and denied his inspection, dodging his attempts to pinch them steady. She passed him the less-elusively-minded plaque itself instead, and studied the symbology etched into the bug's glass.

"As for the fabricants and dwemer constructs," she continued, "I know Lord Seht's models. It's what I spent my life in the Radius doing. Studying his work. Cataloging improvements. Writing books. I could tell there was something wrong before I even went down there. The things in the cavern are crude. And their registry numbers are wrong. Go ahead and claim that there's no source behind your portal, but *something* on the other side is cobbling together old scrap into new machinery and sending it through. And it has access to at least some kind of incomplete or hasty refabrication process. There's evidence in the pieces over on your desk. Missing or melted-over numbers, double-stamped numbers, rushed re-annealing, if it was ever done to begin with..."

Divayth turned over the plaque in his hand, discovering its featureless back for himself. "I never claimed that the portal has no source, only that it wasn't deliberately opened by man or mer," he mused. "I intend to discover the circumstances that led to its creation. And to study how it's sustaining itself. I assume we'll find answers for your questions as well, once we've found out precisely where in Clockwork it leads."

Caliya looked up. "You're going through it?"

Divayth met her gaze. "Yes. Once I've stabilized it, and found a suitable expedition force to accompany me." He narrowed his eyes. "You *will* be part of this?"

"Of course."

She agreed before the meaning had even sunken in. Not that she had to think much about it. Assisting Divayth's efforts was the sole reason she was here. Her ultimate fate awaited her by the wizard's direction. If he was going through that strange, gleaming rift down there, then so was she.

For some reason, that alone seemed to pull a strong reaction from him. His entire demeanor visibly warmed. He passed her sequence plaque back with a nod of approval.

"Excellent."

She frowned. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

The wizard tipped back the rest of his coffee and turned as the teleporter chimed. "There's been a dearth of bravery around me in recent days. And, given your reaction to the victims you stumbled across, I was beginning to worry about your own conviction."

The smell of food was deeply, deeply distracting. She watched a handful of servants bring trays to the table behind them.

“Don’t worry about my conviction, muthsera,” she promised, rising from the divan, “I’m here to see this through.”

*Bravery has nothing to do with it.*

## Chapter End Notes

I mean, it's \*got\* to be a mess down there, right?

# Closing the Book

## Chapter Summary

Sotha Sil spends a few minutes with the Astronomer's apprentice as he prepares his final gift for Caliya.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*A seed in desert's sand, determined to live, destined to outgrow this small, imperfect world.  
You were never mine, but destiny blessed me with your youth. And that is enough.  
It must be enough.*

The Astronomer bowed his head as Sotha Sil approached. His apprentice stepped forward with a smile. In her brass hands she cradled a multi-planar mnemonic receptacle -- a star, as many called them -- carefully encased in a crystalline gear.

"It's all ready for you, Lord Seht," she said. "The last one."

"Thank you, Amili," he replied, lifting the gem from her fingers. It glowed brightly in his presence, hovering above his palm with soft blue-white shine.

"Always a pleasure to serve, my lord."

Such cheer. Such a charismatic young woman.

*Relish these days*, the Father of Mysteries mused. *They will not be yours much longer*. Her crossroads quickly approached, after all. Another light to extinguish. Another difficult path to traverse.

The sorcerer exchanged a meaningful glance with the Astronomer, who bowed again and waited. Sotha Sil extended a palm to Amili Lloryn, and gestured toward the door.

"Walk with me, please."

He was even allowed a smile, this time. She returned it and looked back as though seeking her master's permission as well, then followed her god out of the mnemonic manifestation chamber when the Astronomer nodded and returned to his duties.

Sotha Sil led them through the halls at a leisurely pace. All heads turned as he passed, though few overall were in attendance at the planisphere this morning. Today marked the fifth and final time the sorcerer would seek these services in this circumstance, and young Amili was nearly bursting with curiosity beside him.

*So...*

Like an echo from the future, her question finally spoke itself when they rounded a corridor and seemed alone.

"So..." She nodded at the crystal he carried, voice low. "It's true, then? Caliya's really...gone?"

Rumors had already begun, of course. Divayth Fyr's aurbic shadow darkening the observatory was more than enough to spark wild speculation among the least disciplined of the Fortress's citizens. And Amili knew the contents of the memory he now held. This and every other manifestation he'd asked her to create.

"All who touch this realm leave their mark upon the gears," the sorcerer replied. "Her hand directs the course of the Chrononymic Will just as surely as does yours, Amili. Even now."

*Especially now.*

The apprentice sighed, ever-discontent with the shroud around his answers. "I know that, but

you know what I mean, Lord Seht.”

*I do, my child.*

“I wonder though, do *you* know what you mean?” he countered instead.

More quiet exasperation met his words, but an introspective spark flickered behind her eyes. He must offer her this time to consider his statements, but he did not have to spend it idly while they walked.

Amili and Caliya could have been friends. In another world, another life, they might have done well together. Two bright minds in a hive of stoic apathy, splashes of colorful sin among ascetic virtue. Curiosity and duty. Mischief and service. Two manifestations of the same machine. But two different destinies as well, and two vastly divergent paths to arrive at them. They could not have grown together, here. Caliya would never have left, had she any companions at all to leave behind. And the Astronomer would never have selected Amili if the grease of a troublemaker stained her reputation.

The sorcerer regarded his star-gear. “Caliya has returned to Nirn Above,” he confirmed softly. “As she once brought about Tamriel Final from outside the walls of the Fortress, so now does her work bring her beyond the gears of Clockwork itself.”

"And you just let her go?"

So quick, the response. But she knew the truth, already. She simply wanted to hear it from his lips.

"She was never mine to keep."

Amili looked up at him sharply. He did not return her gaze. She knew also the truth of his intervention with Proctor Pullo. The vast control he had exerted over the scholar's life. The singular discipline enacted upon her. Amili had prepared that receptacle as well, the one Sotha Sil had stored in the Zenith for Caliya and Divayth to discover. She would not say it aloud, but he strongly suspected that this knowledge was the cause of her surprise.

After all, how was she not his to keep? He had guided her path with hands visible and invisible for so very long.

The silence remained for quite some time.

Then, slowly, a nod. A quiet exhale. A moment of reflection.

And, at last, the smile.

“Must be a relief for you, then,” the apprentice suggested brightly. “To finally get rid of her.”

The teeth of fate's gears caught his heart once more. How simple, this wound. Inextricable. So much more painful than its mere prediction. So much harsher to hear these words finally spoken aloud.

Undeterred by his silence, Amili laughed. “I bet you had the best sleep of your life!”

How he wished to laugh with her. To smile. To react in any way. His only solace was her indefatigable spirit, unwavering in its warmth even as she worked alongside his quiet, emotionless Astronomer. And, true to character, the young apprentice shrugged and looked around as they made their way to the central mnemonic chamber.

“Do you even sleep, Lord Seht?”

A question asked by so many.

Thousands of stars glimmered for their master. Quiet conversations among a handful of visitors fell silent, and many eyes tracked the pair as they crossed to the exit.

“Thank you for your service, Amili,” he told her, sobering her cheer significantly. He raised his eyes to the constellations. “Steward my memories well. And contemplate the fragility of such things.”

*For they are all I will ever have of you.*

All he would ever have of Caliya, as well.

“Of course, my lord.” The apprentice bowed. “You can count on me.”

He regarded her with somber melancholy and considered the truth of that promise as his power gathered within. She couldn't know the fate that yet awaited her. The decision she would one day have to make.

Still, he nodded once.

“Farewell, custodian,” he bade softly. “We will not speak again.”

And the light took him before she could reply.

It brought the sorcerer to the observatory, buzzing with mechanical activity. The next place that he must be. Dozens of factotums marched about, cleaning, sweeping, rewiring, polishing. Refurbishing the space to its former state, preparing it for its next occupants. All of those things the building needed. All of those things Caliya could not upkeep alone.

Two crates of her possessions had been prepared. They squatted among the bustle, twin gleaming brass cubes nearly filled to the brim. Even still, with moments to spare, a few factotums still loaded them according to instruction, stacking the last of her books and journals neatly into the corner. They paid their creator no mind as he circled the crates and bent down. Out here, alone, the performative reverence they displayed in the Fortress was not necessary. The sorcerer removed a small panel along one edge of one crate and lifted a long, thin glass case from the drawer it revealed.

Four shining gear-stars nestled in perfect alignment within a brass housing. He opened the glass and set the fifth into the empty, shaped hole beside them.

And he closed the lid, and he slipped the box back into its drawer, and he closed the drawer back into the side of the crate. In perfect synchrony, eight factotums lifted the pair of top panels onto their bases, and sank the catches into their housings with a satisfying series of winding clicks. A wave of magic swept both crates as their locking enchantments self-invoked.

Sotha Sil closed his eyes, and lifted his arms.

In a flash of transliminal divinity, the crates vanished from sight.

Within moments, Divayth Fyr and Caliya Derynval would pause their breakfast and their conversation about the nature of wards and the various manners in which to remove them, and drop their eyes to the floor as both mages noticed at once an unexpected delivery to the Maiden’s Suite of Tel Fyr.

## Chapter End Notes

Quick little bridge today, to break up the Tel Fyr sequences and move things along. And to procrastinate more conversation between Divayth and Caliya, because damn they're difficult to write. I left Amili's fate deliberately ambiguous because it depends on the PC's actions in the associated quest, but Sotha Sil's prediction still stands, in my mind. If she becomes the next Astronomer, he'll never speak to Amili again. And if she's cast from the Apostles and left to waste in Slag Town as a Tarnished, I can't imagine him ever visiting her there, either.

Man, imagine if you had a friend who could see the future, and literally the only time he ever says anything straightforward is to let you know when this goodbye is the last one.

What a downer. ;)

# Ghosts of the Past

## Chapter Summary

Now that Caliya's things have been safely delivered, Divayth dives right in and shares a few upsetting discoveries with the scholar.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Caliya stared at the crates in her room. They looked so out of place, all sharp angles and shaped geometry hunkered together and reflecting the floral glow of the garden with a mirror's polish. Sees and Gazes huddled in a corner by the bed, and watched their master approach the unannounced delivery.

"I believe we've found the reference for your clockwork message, Ms. Derynval," Divayth mused with a smirk. The wizard had been in high spirits ever since she'd reaffirmed her pledge to see his expedition through. "Obviously, the 'contents' refer to these boxes..."

--We don't know what they are!"

"They just slipped from the river's current to this shore..."

His head snapped to the Argonians, curiosity draining away.

"Ah. You two." His tone hardened to ice. "Good. Come here."

The pair exchanged a nervous glance. Sees bodied Gazes out in front and held her like a meat shield as the pair shuffled closer, visibly distressed enough to make even Caliya uncomfortable.

"What are you doing with them?" she asked.

"A bit of menial labor, don't trouble yourself," the wizard dismissed lightly, leading the pair toward the door. "*Someone* ought to be punished for what happened this morning."

For what happened?

Did he mean with the caverns?

The scholar stared. "What?" She started closer. "No, it wasn't their fault!"

Divayth puffed wind at her with a palm, just enough to stop her advance. "They are responsible for your comfort in Tel Fyr," he explained. "And your safety, when I am not around. You were unable to sleep. They were not there to--"

"They had to sleep as well, muthsera!"

Was he really blaming *them*?

The wizard frowned at her insistence, like a stain that resisted removal. "Do not presume to tell me how to run my tower, Ms. Derynval," he warned. "This is my home. These are my slaves. They are my property. You are a guest. I will treat them as I see fit." He returned his attention to the twins. "Rest assured, what I have in store for their failure will not compare to the cruelty I've witnessed from other House members."

Gazes glanced at the scholar as though she wanted to say something. Sees's claws digging into the back of her neck were enough of a reminder not to make things worse. Divayth took them away without another word, leaving the room large and quiet, and its sole occupant unsettled once more.

She was supposed to suffer her own consequences.

Not them.

They hadn't done anything wrong.

The scholar could only hope he'd be gentle with them. She sighed and turned from the door to start examining the crates, looking for their unlocking mechanisms to take her mind from the injustice. The plaque could wait, if she could just *see* what was inside, first.

After a few seconds of searching, she was almost surprised to find that the catches for both lids were missing.

Almost.

*Another puzzle, then. Maybe the plaque can't wait.*

She picked the dovah-fly from its perch behind her ear and tugged her gloves off as well, fitting the bug into the brass. A few rustled desk drawers produced a notebook and a stick of graphite, and she leaned over the tabletop to work out the solution. Copy the partials, overlay the wings, determine the missing pieces, solve the variables. It was a recursive formula -- of course it was -- *mostly* mathematical and fairly straightforward, but working through iteration after iteration of the self-referential inner loops would chew up a lot of her time. One final test of acumen, and a bit of perseverance.

At least it was calming work.

Divayth's words bothered her, though. His home. And she was just a guest. It reminded her that she didn't have a home anymore. No place to call her own. All of this beautiful, natural splendor wasn't hers. And she had no idea where to begin finding her own way, when her work here was done.

Something to worry about later, she supposed.

Adaptability was her specialty. Right?

The wizard himself returned some minutes later, unaccompanied.

"You haven't opened them yet?"

"Of course not." She didn't look up. "You're welcome to try, muthsera."

The scholar didn't think much of it, even as she felt his power ripple against the seals in a quiet probe. The trick to it was clearly contained in the plaque, probably buried as a second layer of ciphers sprinkled throughout the translated cargo manifest. She just had to get to it, and he would just have to be patient.

Or perhaps she could race him to the solution...

But of course, patience was not in Divayth Fyr's wheelhouse.

And apparently, neither were puzzles.

An infernal, grinding squeal ripped through the air. Caliya had enough experience with malfunctioning machines to reflexively Deafen herself, and whipped around to see the wizard methodically cutting through the upper lip of one crate with a disk of spinning light balanced on his nails. He noticed her attention and shouted something above the buzzing screech, but she wasn't about to risk hearing damage on his behalf. The scholar sighed and turned back to her equations.

So much for a race.

She'd nearly finished one set when the vibrato in the aurbis stilled. Divayth peeled the film of magic from her ears without warning, and the scholar shook her head like a surprised fabricant and worked her jaw to chase away the tingle behind her tongue.

*Do you mind??*

"As I said, there's more than one way to defeat a puzzle," he gloated.

"Go on then," she invited over one shoulder. "Open the other, if you must."

If he thought a display of brute force was impressive, he really didn't understand the core tenets of Clockwork. And sure enough, with a deflated harrumph, the wizard noisily set about slicing through the other crate as well. She just hoped that he wasn't destroying any of her possessions in the process.

Divayth didn't bother to dispel her Deafen a second time when he finished, leaving the scholar to her work while he hoisted the lids away and, presumably, clambered inside the chest-high crates to slake his thirst for discovery. She assumed he was going to go through her things whether she tried to stop him or not, and most of her work was probably written for him, anyway. At least one of those boxes had to be full of books and sequence plaques and little else. She did wonder what was in the other, though. The observatory had been a large place, but she'd never been the sort to accumulate...stuff. At least, not the kind of things she expected Lord Seht would allow her to escape the city with.



As she finished the last iteration of the recursion, she dispelled her curse. On cue, the wizard spoke.

“...Loryne Derynval...?”

His tone was ponderous, quiet.

Caliya whipped around as though slapped. “What did you just say?”

The mer had been busy.

Scattered all over the floor, the bed, and the rim of the central flower well were those exact books and piles of plaques she’d expected to see. Divayth himself was not currently in view, but he did rise from the center of the farther crate, back to her, and glanced over his shoulder.

“Your mother, I assume?”

“How do you know that?” she demanded.

Instead of a reply, he turned, revealing a brass-and-glass box cradled carefully in his hands. It contained a polished and beautifully gilded elven skull, set firmly into a gleaming display. At its base was a thin metal placard, no doubt embossed with the very name he’d just read aloud.

The wizard watched her expectantly.

Caliya’s jaw nearly hit the floor.

Divayth levitated himself out of the crate and walked to the desk, sharing the discovery with her. He held it out as if to let her take it, but she shook her head and backed away, snapped out of her reverie by proximity and disgust.

“I...I don’t want it,” she managed, barely able to blink. Those empty, brass-lined sockets stared back at her, hopeless and forlorn. Her gut writhed at the very sight of it. A filigree of lines carved ritualistically into the bone caught the bluish edge of the mystic light.

Divayth frowned. “I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t want it, muthsera,” she repeated, firmly. “Get rid of it. Break it.”

The scholar could have punched him in the teeth and produced a less stunned reaction. It didn’t matter, though. Whatever the Father of Mysteries wanted her to do with that thing, she wasn’t going to.

“It’s your mother’s *skull*, Caliya,” the wizard argued with just a hint of disbelief. “I understand that Sil teaches nothing of the old ways, but certainly basic ancestral reverence didn’t fall by the wayside.”

“Oh, *now* you’re being religious? What am I going to do with it?” she challenged, taking another half-step away. “Enshrine it?”

“Yes.” The furrow in his brow deepened. “That *is* traditionally what’s done with remains.”

The scholar glared. “Where, muthsera?” She flung a pointing finger behind her. “On top of the bed? The mantle in the overlook? Give her a nice view?”

He set the case down on the desk, resting a palm atop it as though to protect it from her.

“Perhaps your family has an ancestral tomb,” the wizard suggested darkly. “The Library at Vivec might be able to research your heritage, or perhaps Mournhold, if the records weren’t yet duplicated.”

She stared at the crates across the way just to keep from looking at the thing, barely even listening. “Go right ahead, then. You can find that out for yourself and perform rites *for* her, if you’re so aghast that I won’t.”

He took a moment to respond to that. Long enough for her to step away and peer into the nearer container. Books, boxes, and glassware, all as neatly-packed as the innards of a factotum. All notably lower than the edge Divayth had sheared off.

“You don’t care at all about your ancestry?” the wizard asked, coming astride of her.

“It isn’t something Clockwork focuses on,” she sighed, calming now that the shock had passed. Today was just going to be one of those days, wasn’t it? “There are very few family lines in the Fortress, muthsera. Apostles almost never have children, and Auxiliaries have only had a few that I knew of.” She glanced at him. “It’s a place where the willing leave their heritage behind to become a part of something greater than themselves. A part of Lord Seht’s divine machine. Family ties weaken devotion.”

*And it's no place for the young and vulnerable, anyway.*

She walked away from his narrowing scrutiny, uninterested in whatever judgment he was about to hand down, and started to pick up some of the books he'd thrown everywhere.

"Don't touch those, they're in a specific order," he requested, gently. "You really have no interest in what happens to your mother's--"

"No, I don't, not at all," she affirmed before he could say the words again. "I never knew the woman, I barely remember her, I had no m..." The word faltered briefly in her throat. "No mother."

She hadn't even remembered that name until he'd said it.

"...Very well," Divayth replied behind her. "I will ensure that her remains are looked after."

"Enjoy yourself."

"I suppose you've about as much interest in what happens to your mummified fingers, as well?"

She shot him an exasperated stare. "Please tell me you're kidding."

The wizard tucked his arms behind his back and nodded at the farther crate, where a small brass case rose from within and unclasped itself for her, presenting the scholar with three wormlike gray husks preserved in vacuum-conformed glass. Notably darkened at their tips, they still bore the grease stains she'd carried all throughout her life in that dusty, lifeless wasteland.

She took the case from his Telekinesis just to close it once more, then passed it back. "If you don't throw them out, I will."

"I'm certain I can find uses for them," Divayth promised, plucking the box from the air and retreating to pile it with the...the other discovery.

"Whatever it is, I don't want to hear about it," Caliya replied, wholly uninterested in any weird Tamrielic magics that required the participation of severed elven body parts. She looked around at the scholarly mess. Whatever "organization" he claimed to have, she couldn't see it. "You said I had an unpleasant surprise waiting when these were delivered."

Anything to change the subject.

"Just a moment," the wizard bade, leaving her to continue gazing into the crates. She didn't want to unpack yet, she realized. Especially if more of her "childhood mementos" lay in wait. It was even more imperative that she decode that list to avoid further unpleasant revelations, and she waited until Divayth had taken his gruesome prizes from the desk and sent them off before returning to apply the key to its cipher.

The wizard busied himself doing something near the wall while she worked. And then he busied himself wandering among the chaos he'd made of her bedroom. She just about had half the glyphs deciphered into a functional alphabet when he returned to her side, thankfully carrying just two books rather than anything else that belonged in a mausoleum or scrap yard.

"I'm afraid your work has made it to Tamriel, Ms. Derynval," he said, laying them side-by-side at the edge of the desk, "though perhaps not in the form you might expect."

A copy of her text *On the Peculiar Idiocies of the Nix Hound* stared back at her, bound in its green cover with gold inlay gears decorating the corners and spine. Her own name was neatly engraved beneath the title, glimmering in the blue light of the lantern fruits. One of her properly Nirn-published books, one of Lord Seht's many rewards for her diligent research. Beside it, in otherwise identical green-and-gear dressings but a bit more battered and fraying at the edges, was a slightly different version.

Even before she read the title, she knew what she was about to see. Her heart sank in trepidation.

*A Consideration of the Clockwork Nix*, the scholar read to herself.

As author, *Barilzar, OCA*.

"Barilzar..." she hissed.

Master Great Gear himself.

The very name flushed her skin with hot anger.

Divayth had hardly finished setting it down before she snatched it back up, flipping

immediately to the table of contents. A wave of her hand opened her own version, eyes darting from page to page and back.

“Seht’s brass balls...” she whispered, shoulders dropping. Same chapters. Same subjects. Different wording.

They weren’t identical.

But they never had been.

“How. How is he still doing this?” She looked up. “Where did you get this?”

“Still?” the wizard prompted, watching her keenly. “Barilzar has plagiarized your work before?”

*Yes. Many, many, many times.*

The scholar offered a long-suffering glare and a stiff, slow nod. “Back when I apprenticed with him,” she explained. “Back when he still lived in the Fortress. I thought I was done with that tarnished, smooth-gear, single-piston fool.” She sighed, dropping the book back down. She couldn’t even be angry anymore. Not for long. It just couldn’t keep surprising her.

Nothing ever stayed hers.

“When he left...”

*When he left, and left me behind, I’d thought I was rid of him for good.*

“...Well, to his credit, these books did lead me to Clockwork, and to you,” Divayth commented gently when she didn’t finish. “When the rift opened, I counseled his opinion first, before seeking Sil directly. And the moment I saw the works on your shelves, I realized the similarities...”

The scholar’s hollow laugh was more like a sneer. “Oh, the one time his appropriation benefits me. And I didn’t even know he was still stealing.” She looked down at the books again, at her own irreverent treatise on Lord Seht’s paradoxical decision to fill his orderly realm with such chaotic creatures, and at Barilzar’s humorless, magisterial reinterpretation thereof. She pushed away the niggling realization that this was the plan all along. That all roads somehow led to Divayth Fyr. All her life. Everything she’d ever done. “Let me guess, muthsera. He warned you about wasting clicks of the Great Gear before absolving himself and his experiments of all responsibility, and refused to participate further.”

The wizard considered her judgment with an acquiescent nod. “A fair assessment.”

If he was hoping to placate her, it wasn’t working. Even just seeing that name brought up painful memories. Like her mother, she’d all but forgotten him by now. Before she’d become an Apostle herself, one of her duties as Auxiliary had been to apprentice herself to Barilzar, following him around his half-dozen-and-two laboratories scattered about the Fortress and Radius as whim struck. An infamously difficult artificer to work for, Master Great Gear was always demanding dangerous and menial things of her and the other unfortunates assigned under his command, sending them out into the wilds to harvest materials he “left in another lab,” running messages through the fabricant-infested wasteland to the fortress and back again to collect replies, scouring sharp rubbish heaps for misplaced tools and demanding compliance with volatile, remote experiments where little help could be reached should something go wrong. Few Apostles made her quite as jealous as Barilzar ever had. His long history of personal assistance to Lord Seht coupled with such callous mistreatment had always left a bitter taste in her mouth, and, as the polish on the piston, he’d taken to assuming credit for her work for the duration of her apprenticeship to him.

All of this she confessed to Divayth, who listened with unexpected patience, sympathy, and just a touch of amusement.

“For a while I thought it was my age, or rank,” she finished quietly. “That he was helping me get my name out there, by giving my words an author that other Apostles knew and respected. I thought one day he’d offer a co-authorship, and finally submit my writings under my name alone.” She sighed, and shook her head. “And then I thought--”

“You used to be so full of hope,” the wizard commented warmly, interrupting her rant. He leaned against the desk beside her now, the pair of them side-by-side and facing her strewn-about things. The shrouded arcane glow of the room spilled handsomely across his skin.

"I used to be naive," she corrected, looking away. "Young. Foolish. I know better, now."

"I still see it in your eyes, from time to time," Divayth challenged. "That wondrous, speculative soul that still lives in there. She was quite captivating on the balcony overlooking the bay, you know. And in the alchemy lab." A slow, dark smile widened his lips. "And at the dinner table..."

*A wondrous, speculative soul.*

Maybe he wasn't listening. Maybe she was still being foolish, hearing false compassion where she so desperately wanted it to be true.

The scholar's eyes dropped to her brass augments, forcibly grafted to her hand. Those ugly, gleaming pieces of a god she would carry to her grave. An inescapable gear in Lord Seht's divine machine, locked into its endless rotation. She shook her head again.

"No." Caliya turned away, back to that slap-in-the-face that was Barilzar's name on her work, still haunting her long years after they'd parted ways. Was that how the Father of Mysteries had gotten her work published? By tapping his old "Nine Analyses of the Exalted Enigmas" assistant as "translator?" She stacked her book on top of his. The true work. Not old Great Gear's edited falsehood. Whether or not it was all meant to guide her and Divayth together, that didn't matter. Mission accomplished, she supposed. More rust in the breach.

"It's just weakness. Idle hands unwind the gears. We should get back to work."

*Enough of this trip down memory lane. You don't care, and neither should I, Lord Fyr.*

She pulled her half-broken code back to her and reached for the graphite to continue deciphering it. Divayth pushed her papers away again with one hand.

The other slipped around her waist.

"Is this what you do, Ms. Derynval?" he asked suddenly, softly, closing the gap between them. "You throw yourself into your work to take your mind from unpleasant things?"

The scholar stiffened, resisting his attempts to lean her against him.

"Yes." She stared down at her notes to avoid looking elsewhere. It was hard to tell if the heat enveloping her radiated from his power or her own skin. "It's a productive way to deal with problems."

*Unlike this...invasive waste of time.*

"Have you ever truly relaxed, even once in your life?" the wizard murmured in her ear.

*No.*

The answer came easily. But it stuck on her tongue. He touched her shoulder, following its curve to the base of her neck. A quick thrill threaded down her spine as soft fingertips found her bare neck. She wanted him to care. Almost desperately, she did. But why? Because Lord Seht was gone? Because she needed some other powerful mage to complain at? Someone else to listen to her problems? She caught herself tilting her head away and reclaimed her senses, picking his wrist off her shoulder and untangling herself from him with an impatient exhale.

"Please, muthsera--"

"Divayth."

She shot him a flat glare at the correction, and promptly regretted her mistake. His unflinching focus was captivating, and much closer than she realized. The intensity in his fathomless eyes was difficult to look away from. Was the room getting darker?

"Enough of this 'muthsera' and 'Lord Fyr'," the wizard bade softly, reaching for her again. "It was charming for a time, but you're no servant, Ms. Derynval."

She caught both of his wrists and shored up her fortitude, squeezing when he tried to tug free. "Fine. Divayth." The name sounded rude on her lips. Like 'Sil.' But she didn't want to argue. "Let me get back to what I was doing. Please."

"You're wounded, Caliya," he argued. "All of this talk of injustice and pain, sundering old scars anew..."

No. Enough talking. She was done talking. It wasn't accomplishing anything. She dug her fingers into his skin. His power pulsed to the rhythm of his heart beneath her grip, steady but quickening. He lowered his chin, scarlet eyes seeking to pierce deeper than her stubborn glare.

Something nasty and sharp inside her bared its teeth at his relentless insistence.

"You brought me here to work for you," she nearly growled. "Stop getting in my way."  
And it worked.

A brief tick of surprise broke the wizard's intensity. And then, all at once, he yielded, insulted suspicion diluting his focus. Divayth withdrew, restoring a respectful space between them as he studied her in a newfound light. She held her ground, unapologetic and just a little feral, and rubbed away the itch lingering beneath her ear.

After a moment of silence, he resumed a stance of academic inspection, smoothed down his goatee with a thumb and forefinger, and nodded slowly.

"Fine. But don't think I've finished with you," her company threatened softly. "We'll continue this later." He collected the Nix Hound works with a wave of his hand, turned to survey her remaining books, then retreated to walk among them, peering from title to title and collecting four or five into a Telekinetic stack as if nothing had happened. It trailed behind one shoulder as he crossed to the door and paused to glance back. She watched him with steadfast uncertainty, nervous that she'd crossed a line.

But when he spoke, his tone was even and calm.

"I'll leave you to your endeavors, then, Ms. Derynval. I certainly have plenty to occupy myself with, now that your things have arrived." He tilted his head in consideration. "While I understand that your past is a painful subject, and you are unused to receiving comfort, I would advise you to speak more kindly to me in the future. My forgiveness is conditional, at best."

She didn't apologize. But she did nod.

"Understood, muthsera."

She wasn't going to call him Divayth after that. And if he noticed, he said nothing about it. The scholar turned back to her work as the door opened.

It closed soon after with a well-oiled click.

## Chapter End Notes

\*Bangs table like an angry toddler\* Another chapter that took like six rewrites to finish, shEEEEEEEEEEEEsh

Anyway everybody welcome back our old friend "Divayth Failing to Charm Caliya." But she's warming up to him. ;) About as well as a cornered wildcat, but still. Parts of this scene have been in my head in some form for months now, and were hinted at in very early chapters. I'd always intended something about Caliya's work to be the sort-of reason why Divayth trust her expertise so quickly so early on. I did have a different idea at the onset, though -- that Sil himself published her exact work under his own name and released it as an "oops this interesting and rare book of mine escaped Clockwork by accident, I sure hope a completely unconnected and totally coincidental chain of events doesn't land it in Divayth Fyr's hands" breadcrumb, but then for various reasons I realized that wouldn't quite work. So we get to name-drop another famous Apostle, and pick on the fact that Barilzar's an absolute, self-admitted gearshaft to his assistants.

Plus I always intended for Sil to send Caliya's mother's skull home with her, and for Divayth to take it instead. Why? Haha. Good question. And the answer is probably outside the scope of this fic, unless I start up a new, much more slice-of-life-heavy post-HoF Part II with these dunmeri idiots.

Anyway, thanks for reading, as always. :) Pour a cold one out for poor Sees and Gazes, too. They literally didn't ask for any of this.



# Getting Down to Business

## Chapter Summary

Having successfully chased Divayth away, Caliya throws herself into work to avoid thinking about the treasure trove of unpleasantry that the wizard dumped on her last chapter.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

True to his word, Caliya didn't see Divayth again for the rest of the day. She was able to finish decoding the cargo manifest in peace, and, sure enough, the skull and her surgery waste were both on there. They were buried among a list of her publications and other books she owned, as well as entries for several sets of fabricant deconstruction and analysis tools she was pleasantly surprised to see. Also packed away somewhere were a set of star gears, or "Recollective Systemized-Lattice Sprockets 1-6" as Lord Seht had called them, so it seemed the Father of Mysteries had more stories yet to tell her. More unwanted pieces of the past to haunt her with. She wondered how he was expecting her to view them though, since extraction and containment tools hadn't been added to the boxes. Maybe he expected her to build her own, which she certainly would have been capable of doing...if she had the right materials. The scholar didn't expect Divayth to simply allow her to melt down the constructs in the caverns, after all.

Not that she was planning to deal with any of this until after the portal had been dealt with, anyway.

Other surprises included an ornate cage, presumably for the dovah-fly, and a jeweler's maintenance set, presumably for her hand. Notably missing were any instructions for opening the crates themselves, which left her wondering what the Clockwork God had intended her to do, had Divayth not sheared them apart for her.

*But you probably knew he'd do that, didn't you, Lord Seht?*

She still suspected more to the list than this single layer of encoding, but decided to give her brain a break by cleaning up the wizard's mess for what she'd thought would be just a few minutes. Her works ended up displacing his in the bookcase in the bedroom, and, by the time she'd finished arranging her collection, emptying more from the containers, adding those to the shelves, finding homes for all her tools, and tricking a very belligerent clockwork bug with attachment issues into its new home, the door opened and Sees and Gazes staggered back inside, looking haggard but thankfully uninjured.

She hadn't found the star-gears yet, though. Or the maintenance set. She decided to give the packing materials a more thorough look-over later and clambered back out to greet the twins. The dovah-fly tink-tink-tinked unhappily against the finely-threaded bars of its cage as she walked away, but considering the reaction much of the tower had to its presence, it would be better to store it here than where it wanted to be -- on her.

The Argonians brought with them apologies and lunch. The morning had slipped by far more quickly than expected, leading the scholar to suspect that time flowed differently on Tamriel than it did in Clockwork. They stayed and chatted while she ate, and, with a little persuasion, she was able to dig out of them the details of their punishment. Apparently, Divayth had set them to mucking the guar stables for a few hours, a filthy and backbreaking chore that all present agreed they didn't deserve. Of course they'd bathed before returning to the tower, and convinced her to do the same when they found out where she'd gone instead of sleeping. It seemed a fine enough thing to do,

and, after a relaxing soak to scrub away the caverns and one Gazes-approved, high-necked amethyst and lavender dress later, she asked them to lead her down to the sorting stations to really start earning her keep.

To the trio's surprise, a few additions had been made to the room since her tour, and they were causing quite the workflow disruption.

Hanging from the walls were several duplications of the exploded-anatomy diagrams from the scholar's books, a few for every fabricant she had seen in Abanabi that morning. All of the workers and slaves crowded around them in careful study, some drifting from one to the other or jockeying for better positions where they were. Aryon caught her eye across the hall and waved her over, and she thanked the twins and dismissed them to get some well-deserved rest.

"You look lovelier every time I see you, Caliya, good afternoon. Purple suits you," the spellwright complimented with a smile and a quick once-over as she approached. Draped in one arm was a stack of limp parchment, the upper edges of which looked suspiciously familiar. He noticed her interest and shared them with her, confirming her guess. More copies of fabricant diagrams, awaiting display. "Your work, as I understand it?" he asked genially. "Master Fyr had our scribes duplicate them not long ago, and asked they be distributed generously among the workforce."

"May I see one?" she asked.

"Of course."

He passed the top copy to her and she took only a few moments to study it, looking for any inaccuracies. She knew all too well the slipshod quality that could be produced by those who didn't understand what they were doing, or who didn't care. The sheet didn't look hand-redrawn, however. It appeared, even under scrutiny, to be a perfect reproduction, albeit enlarged for clarity. Fresh magic lingered about it, as well. Some sort of spellwork must have created the stack.

Good.

She would have been a bit unsettled if such detail could be copied so quickly by ordinary Tamrielic laborers.

Along with the proper titles for the fabricants, her own name had been added to the lower corner, as well. That was a nice touch. Aryon couldn't say for certain, but he assumed the decision must have been Divayth's. No one else would have authorized such an alteration.

"What brings you down here?" the spellwright asked as he collected the parchment from her and returned it to his arm.

"I was hoping to get to work," she replied, looking around at the stations and the piles on and around them.

"Ah!" Aryon's expression brightened. "You're finally joining me, then? Perhaps you'd accompany me to the storage halls. More of these need to be shared there," —he rustled the stack as he spoke— "and I've a feeling there's going to be quite the rush to reclassify a number of miss-sorted parts. Your natural expertise might be best suited overseeing that effort, today."

Well, that sounded promising, and simplified things quite a bit. A chance to look through more of the recovered specimens very much interested her, and she was pleasantly surprised that Aryon had such a suitable assignment so quickly. As he led the way back to the teleporters, he thumbed through the parchments in his arms.

"These are masterful diagrams, Caliya," he commented. "And very thorough. It must have taken quite a while to complete them."

"Years," she agreed, drawing a raised brow from the spellwright. He didn't seem skeptical, though. Just surprised. She tilted her head concessionally. "Well, the sketches themselves went through only a few months of iterations, but the research involved spanned much longer."

"Did it?" he prompted conversationally. Apparently, he wanted to hear more.

The scholar nodded. "Yes. A lot of hunting and capturing intact specimens, pulling them apart, putting them back together again..."

Aryon nodded as well as he listened, almost too impressed. "So these creatures just...roam the wilds where you're from?"



“They do, they’re all over the place,” she replied, trying to figure out what he was really asking. “In fact, yesterday was the first time I’d ever seen an animal made entirely out of living tissue.”

She expected a strange reaction to that revelation, and she certainly got one. The spellwright’s brow furrowed deeply, and he eyed her as if she’d sprouted a second head. The expression remained even as they stepped through the teleporter together and off the dias.

“You’ve never seen...” He shook his head. “How is that possible?”

Maybe...Did he just want to talk?

“Natural animals don’t exist there. Everything in Clockwork is fabricated,” Caliya explained, glancing around at the extensive storage space. Rows and rows of black shelves filled the room almost floor to ceiling, filled with enough fabricant parts to put any collection she’d ever maintained to shame. Haphazardly-labelled signs had been affixed at irregular intervals and heights, loosely classifying their contents. More workers of various races bustled among them, inspecting individual pieces or finding homes for new ones.

That certainly wouldn’t do.

“So it’s a dwemer ruin, then?” Aryon pressed, leading her toward the stairs of a raised platform in an open corner of the room. “One as large as a city?”

“Oh, no, no,” the scholar corrected. “Everything there is the creation of Lord Seht.”

“...I see,” the spellwright responded. His frown told a different story as he ascended the steps, though. A desk and chair occupied the space, providing a semi-isolated workspace and comfortable overseer’s view. Caliya suspected that they were meant for Divayth himself, to inflict his casual scrutiny upon the proceedings. Aryon paused their conversation with a gentle palm and rapped the edge of the desk with sharp knuckles, turning heads and quieting the general din.

“Attention!” he called with an authority that surprised the scholar. “Master Fyr has acquired illustrative diagrams of the monstrosities below! Our newest guest, the esteemed master of artifice Ms. Caliya Derynval, generously shares her work with us to aid in the sorting and storage of these beasts. Diagrams will be posted around the shelves, please consult these works, familiarize yourselves with them, and allow them to govern your decisions when handling the master’s pieces!”

“The master’s pieces?” Caliya echoed when he nodded a dismissal and turned back to her.

“Of course. It is Master Fyr’s tower, after all.”

And he led her back down from the platform with a kind smile. The scholar contemplated the concept of fabricant ownership while she watched a few workers exchange glances, looking to one another for guidance. Eventually, they began to abandon their paths and gather as the spellwright brought Caliya to the nearest set of shelves and fished a small blue stone from his pocket. Its Adherence enchantment fastened it to the back of the parchment, and also to the edge of the shelf at around chest-level. Remembering the minor chaos of the sorting rooms, the scholar adjusted the sheet until it hung above her own head, more easily viewed by the crowds that were already coalescing around them.

Aryon watched her, considered the improvement, and nodded.

“Very good.”

And he started off toward another set of shelves.

“Continuing our conversation, where *is* the Clockwork City, exactly?” the spellwright asked, repeating the procedure every five or six sets of shelves.

Caliya frowned at the question, casually admiring her own work as he hung it. It had been a while since she’d studied these diagrams, but she was still proud of them, even though they were a few models behind current Fabrication Standards.

“You don’t know?” she asked, exchanging a glance with him. “Lord Fyr’s visited several times. He hasn’t mentioned it?”

The spellwright offered a polite but wry chuckle. “Master Fyr only tells me where he’s going if he intends to bring me along, and even then I might not know until I’m already there. No one has ever accompanied him to Sotha Sil’s private retreat, I’m afraid. And you’re the first he’s ever

returned with.”

“Oh.”

Well then.

She glanced behind them at the throngs gathering to ogle her work for a moment, before finally admitting the truth. “Honestly, ser...I don’t know where it is, either.” And she nodded understandingly at his surprise. “I’ve lived there all my life, but I’ve never left, not until I came here. I couldn’t tell you where it was on a map.”

Guidebooks be damned.

Aryon studied her closely, rounding the outer edge and starting down a new dimension of the room. “Well, I assume you returned here by portal, then...”

The scholar smirked. “I assume so as well,” she replied with a laugh. “I certainly don’t remember.”

Another wild stare greeted her words. But that was a story for another time, and she didn’t necessarily want to get into the exact circumstances of her Last Day in Clockwork with him. She actually quite liked Aryon, she realized. At least, so far. Like the twins, he seemed unpretentious and genuine, and his cordial demeanor made his frequent compliments feel more like mere observations than demands for gratitude. But she had to part ways with him here. She could feel herself getting restless again. That engine inside her that couldn’t stand to be idle for too long was revving again, and toddling around chatting amiably just wasn’t satisfying it.

He let her go with understandable disappointment and a bit of confusion, freeing the scholar to walk among the stacks. Her goal was to find someone who could help her figure out the classification system for storage, but it quickly became apparent that no one really supervised the shelves. A few workers did point her to the accounting corner, where tallies and records were kept, and she spent some time reviewing the documents with a dunmer named Midar in charge of bookkeeping. He seemed quiet and a bit reluctant to talk, not that this stopped her from asking questions, and he did his best to answer what he could. Eventually, though, he confessed that this sort of thing wasn’t really his strength. He was a dwemer specialist under Divayth’s tutelage who had reassigned himself here after his brother’s death in the caverns below. Many of the survivors of the initial assault were like that, according to him -- coping with their grief through a change of pace.

“Although this isn’t really very...distracting work,” Midar admitted, staring forlornly down at the ledgers and tables and charts.

Caliya hadn’t really been particularly interested in learning all of that, and the now-uncomfortable scholar wet her lips, considering her next words. She recognized the social expectation to be sympathetic, and also that she probably shouldn’t upset or annoy him if she wanted to continue accessing the documents he maintained, but she was terrible at that sort of thing. Her pistons just weren’t tuned for normal methods of consolation, and she clearly handled her own despair through industry.

“Well...if you want to stay busy, I’ve certainly got some work for you,” she floundered.

The mer raised his eyes to hers. “Do you? What did you have in mind?”

Caliya studied him carefully, not sure how serious he was.

“Do you want to distract your hands or your head?”

“Either,” he replied with an eagerness that made her think he meant it. “Anything that keeps me from...just sitting here, waiting for scaleskins to tell me what parts they have.”

*I can certainly do that.*

“I’ve got two tasks, then,” the scholar offered. “You heard Aryon’s announcement about my diagrams?”

“Yes.” The mer nodded, then blinked, frowned, and stared. “Wait, *your* diagrams?” His eyes widened in recognition. “*You’re* Derynval? The new artificer?”

Too late did she realize that she hadn’t introduced herself. She was very out of the habit of doing so, in fact. Between her years alone at the observatory and the infamy she’d achieved in the Fortress, she hadn’t had to tell anyone who she was since she was a child. The scholar made a note

to pay more personal attention to that in the future as she confirmed her identity.

Midar's attitude promptly brightened to one of wonder and admiration. She fended off a small barrage of personal questions about constructs to get him back on track, and successfully distracted him with two different suggestions to occupy him more thoroughly than this boring desk job. Stay here and work out an efficient rearrangement of the shelves, or temporarily close down the accounting corner and wander the shelves themselves, making fresh tallies of all the pieces on them.

"I recommend recruiting others to help with the tally," she advised. "Or proposing efficient implementation of the rearrangement, once you've worked one out."

He looked around the room with declining enthusiasm. "I don't know if I could get others to assist. I've...never been much good at supervising."

"Neither have I," Caliya agreed, following his gaze. But the inefficiency of a single person working through that entire stock was far too high. "You'll take the restructuring task, then?"

When he faltered, she frowned at him, impatience misaligning her rods. Her disapproval seemed to shore up his strength. He nodded, though with a conviction that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Good," the scholar decided, before he had a chance to change his mind. "Find some paper, make up a blueprint of the shelves using the information you have. Determine the relative volumes of the materials of the various fabricant types, and how much space should be allocated to--"

"Slow down, slow down, please!" Midar dove for his drawers and shuffled around to find a notebook and quill, and immediately began scribbling down the recommendations she gave him. The scholar obliged, watching him take notes and speaking only as quickly as he could write, laying out step-by-step directions for tackling the problem. The list ended up being nearly a page and a half long by the time she was done, a process that she hadn't realized would be so complex. But he seemed undaunted by its length. Excited, even.

"You're easier to work with than Master Fyr," he noted as he reread it all, a statement which surprised her. He managed a smile when he noticed her reaction. "I mean no disrespect, of course. Only that he doesn't quite...lay things out so easily."

Caliya tucked her hands behind her back. "Little wonder the place runs so poorly, then," she commented, looking around. She felt a lot more authoritative all of a sudden, pleasantly in control of her surroundings now that she'd enlisted assistance. "Clear instructions are necessary for the running of any multi-individual machine."

Midar snickered at the commentary on Divayth's leadership, then drew a steady breath. "I suppose an artificer would know." He looked up. "I think the master just expects everyone to be as quick as he is. It's all simple and easy to him, after all. He can't understand why we'd struggle."

Truth be told, Caliya didn't know the wizard well enough to judge whether or not that was an accurate reading of his personality and expectations. She herself hadn't felt particularly outpaced by him, yet. And frankly, she didn't want to discuss Divayth anyway. She wanted to get to work, and she wanted to leave Midar to his new assignment, now that he had one. Thankfully, he didn't seem too upset by her dismissal. But he did have one last question before she left.

"What will you be doing, ma'am?"

She glanced around at the shelves a moment before answering.

"I'm off to make those tallies you didn't want to," she replied. "To check what's been improperly sorted."

And she still planned to gather as many people to aid in that endeavor as she could. In fact, she was quite a bit more optimistic about her chances now, based on Midar's reception to her advice.

It made her feel like a proper Apostle among Auxiliaries, for once in her life.

A shame that she wasn't one anymore.

Our little scholar's coming into her own... \*proud sniffle\*

Just a short bridge between chapters to detail the rest of the day, and flesh out a bit more of Caliya's personality, especially without Divayth's constant, looming presence at her elbow. Aryon's still very much trying to catch her eye, and it might just be working, if she could ever let her guard down around people who don't obviously seem to want anything from her. I've been studying his TESIII dialogue to try to pull any personality out of it whatsoever, and I've settled on professional-but-warm (at least to Caliya) considering his goals and how he plans to achieve them.

Midar, some of you may recognize, is also an NPC in Tel Fyr. I figured it might be fun to throw him into the mix, to show off Cali's sudden comfort with a receptive workforce, something she never really had in the Brass Fortress. Ya girl's growin' up! And she's uncompressing a whole new facet of herself without the pressure of Apostolic life weighing her down.

Don't worry, though. She'll still be a dick to anyone who tries to get in her way. ;)

# Like a Cat in a Tree

## Chapter Summary

Determined to leave Caliya alone at her request, Divayth spends the day doing other things, only to realize that the scholar has gotten herself into an unusual situation in his absence...

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A day spent with the Rethul twins was a day well spent, indeed. Though the sisters were underwhelming in talent, they more than made up for their shortcomings with charm and personality. And they knew this, too, which made Divayth's life easier when he sought their company under the guise of rewarding Daynea for her bravery and assistance in 'rescuing' Ms. Derynval.

News reached him around dinnertime of the scholar's deeds in the sorting halls, by way of a comment from Aryon. In a matter of hours, she'd had the entire shelving structure rearranged and re-inventoried, a daunting and thankless task the spellwright had been seeking a suitable candidate to oversee for quite some time. When quizzed on her mood, Aryon reported a rather chipper demeanor, as well. Happy as a scribe in an egg mine, the wizard was pleased to hear. With any luck, their productive little kwama queen would recognize his willingness to accommodate her fickle desire for space, and be suitably appreciative when they next met.

He took his meal with the Rethuls as well, and dismissed them soon after, retiring to a personal sanctum adjacent to his quarters for the evening to collect his thoughts. Unlike most of the space in the tower, this room was relatively small and not arranged for company. No flora had been grown for structural lighting here, only crystals in sconces casting a particularly moody glow and a hearth that flared to life upon his arrival. The confining walls were lined with irregular nooks, crannies, and ledges housing his more unstable or valuable curios—mostly Daedric artifacts in power-suppressive storage—and a small, sealed bookcase that contained a private selection of rare, dangerous, or particularly heretical tomes. An enchanting array and his personal set of alchemy glass huddled over some of the sparse floorspace as well, and the sanctum contained only two chairs: one by the fireplace, and the other at a desk tucked into the corner.

Ms. Derynval's works remained where he had left them, resting on the bookcase beside a stack of every publication from Barilzar which he had so far been able to identify as a forgery. Her mother's skull perched on the desk, and her own fingers atop that. He crossed to the gilded bone and set aside the other case for a moment, contemplating the macabre offering the scholar—or perhaps her god—had presented him with.

He had plans for it, of course. Many plans. Though the wizard famously had no particular qualms regarding the art of necromancy, ancestral spirit-calling wasn't technically classified as such, in accordance with the rites and rituals of Dunmeri culture. A frivolous distinction based on mere intent and driven purely by sentiment and tradition, but he'd written more criticisms on this and other arbitrary religious exemptions—and had them subsequently banned by the Tribunal Temple—than most favorably-viewed authors published across all specialties in their lifetimes.

He wondered what drove Ms. Derynval's revulsion toward the memento mori before him, though. Did she blame her mother for stranding her in Clockwork? Or for dying and abandoning her to a fickle god's whims? Or did something more mundane upset her, such as a simple fear of death itself? Did she even know that remains like this could be used to summon a departed soul for

a leisurely chat? If so, had she nothing to say to the woman, after all these years? No interest in meeting the family she'd never known?

Nothing at all to ask of her own (albeit former) flesh and blood?

Well, Divayth himself certainly did. But there was one small problem. On close inspection, those lines carved into the bone suggested that it would shatter if he wasn't very, very careful when executing his intentions.

"Clever, Sil," the wizard muttered, tracing the brass edges of the case with both hands. "Annoyingly clever." Still, he smirked, tilting the skull upward to face him. "What's the matter, old friend? Don't want the great Divayth Fyr playing spirit games with your precious little hermit's ancestry? Surely you know me better than that..."

Far from an impassable obstacle, the embrittling linework was simply a delay that would require some thought, planning, and research to circumvent, but it did make the task a problem he didn't particularly feel up to tackling at the moment.

So, books it was. He abandoned the skull, inspected the subset of publications he'd stolen from the scholar, selected a work on the verminous fabricant, and settled in to read in peace.

The hours promptly melted away. He'd only had small tastes of her writing before now—in the form of a brief perusal in *Clockwork* and that magnificent self-sendoff she'd offered Luciana before leaving the Fortress for good—and he was not disappointed by her long-form prose. Despite being, in essence, a manual on the handling and functionality of the fleet-footed terrors, it was written in a wry and cheeky tone, and with a comfortably-high vocabulary that avoided the common stodgy, pretentious pitfalls of classic academia. It was a work by an intelligent author, yet one devoid of hubris, with a clear goal to educate the capable, and treated neither itself with arrogance nor its readers with disdain. Approachable. Inviting. Everything he wished Ms. Derynval herself would be. The wizard was closing the back cover before he knew it, and found himself wondering if she had a second volume somewhere he might have overlooked.

He hoped that she did. And he was tempted to search for it. A quick arcane sweep of the Maiden's Suite told him she wasn't in her room, so he could, in theory, invade for the sake of discovery.

The wizard rose and stretched stiff legs and a stiffer back. He was out of the private study and halfway to his teleporter when he realized that the scholar wasn't anywhere in the tower at all.

She was on top of it.

*Enjoying the evening?* Divayth wondered, passing a window and realizing that night had fallen quite some time ago. There was little else he could tell of her activities without scrying or projection; she was enveloped once more in one of those protective bubbles like the ward she'd erected down in the caverns. No reason immediately presented itself, however. She wasn't under assault by a flock of cliff racers or a particularly determined bull netch. If she was hoping to hide something from him—or perhaps someone—she would have to be a bit more subtle about it.

A quick trip to her suite left him empty-handed in his search for a sequel to the verminous manual. Ms. Derynval was, however, in possession of several extra copies of the original, as well as other books which he intended to request for his public collection at her earliest convenience. Though they were technically his already, they had been paid for with a resource she no longer needed nor even had access to, and he wasn't that unreasonable a mer to simply steal them without confirmation.

At the very least, it gave him a pretense to find her and open a dialogue.

The wizard rifled through the rest of the books she owned as well before leaving, giving her tattered old Guides to Tamriel another once-over with a quiet smile. How many times had she read them, he wondered again. How many days had she dreamed of walking this world? And yet here she was, unshackled and finally free, and all she could do was get back to work.

A creature of habit, drawn to the familiar.

But he still had ideas to change this.

The brass crates bothered him more than they ought to, though. They still sat where they'd been delivered, empty and either too heavy for the scholar to move or else she'd been called away

to other business before deciding where to put them. Or perhaps, he realized, she simply wasn't done with them yet. Two panels in their sides had curiously been removed to reveal a pair of additional chambers, likewise empty of whatever they'd been meant to hide. He frowned at them for a few moments before his gaze drifted toward the discarded lids lying nearby. Something about her insubstantial reaction to the way he'd opened them for her needled at the wizard, and he couldn't quite lay his finger on what.

*Tink tink.*

*Tink tink tink tink.*

The metallic staccato came from a cage on the desk across the way. Another gift from Sil, it seemed, unless she'd already had one for some other purpose back home. Divayth smirked at the agitated clockwork bug trapped within.

"Oh, did I wake you?" he taunted, looking around as he crossed to it. The trappings of an artificer decorated nearly all available surfaces now, dozens of complex machines and tool sets glinting on tables and hanging from walls. The juxtaposition of brass and vines reminded him of an old dwemer ruin, in fact—an aesthetic he found rather pleasing.

Ms. Derynval's decoded list lay beside her new pet. He read idly through the contents, finding those same things she'd discovered as well.

"Recollective...Systemized...Lattice Sprockets...?" The wizard sighed and shook his head. Precision in all things had always been Sil's *modus operandi*, and language was no different for the eccentric sorcerer. Yet another contradiction of the great Unnamer, whose dogged followers proselytized about the sin of Calling Things What They Were. Another silly sermon about the Nirn-Ensuing, the Tamriel Final. The grand melding of all things they so wholly believed one mer who'd gotten his hands on a touch of godhood could bring about, if they all just worked hard and trusted that their busy little machinations achieved anything at all.

No wonder Ms. Derynval was so compelled to work.

"...Wait a moment..."

He scanned the list more closely, looking through the titles. Surely Sil wouldn't have sent her off without—

*The Truth in Sequence.*

"And they say you're unpredictable, old friend."

Although he had to admit, as he returned to the shelves and sifted around for them, he hadn't expected a copy embossed on their original sequence plaques. While cumbersome, the medium did lend an air of authenticity to the words that was simply missing from ink and paper.

The wizard scanned them all until he found the particular sermon he was looking for. He folded the rest into their linked-chain pile behind it, and Recalled himself to the master's overlook.

It was time to try a new approach.

The room was empty save for Egg-Face, perhaps the only slave in the entire tower whose name he knew, and only then because of its mere absurdity. Seven impressive spikes ran a halo around the back of her brown-scaled head, but she otherwise looked as identical as the rest of their species, as far as he was concerned. The Argonian hauled herself up from a knee-hugging rest by the arch to the balcony and bowed as he approached.

"Muthsera Derynval is above." Her unpleasant rasp had a toneless sing-song that never failed to grate on his nerves. "Sees-Only-Beauty and Gazes-Gently-Upon have asked me to keep watch."

"Is she alone?" Divayth asked.

"Yes."

Good.

"How long has she been up there?"

"Since sunset."

Alone since sunset?

*Well, better up there than in the basement*, he supposed.

"Very well. You're dismissed."

"Thank you."

The wizard started toward the balcony, but stopped after half a step to frown at the slave.

“Thank you, *master*,” he corrected with narrow eyes.

“Thank you, master,” she echoed, in that same toneless sing-song.

He wondered if the guar stables needed re-mucking already.

The night air was cool and clear. Masser and Segunda seemed enormous, still low on the horizon over the bay. Stars cloaked the sky in elegance, peeking between scattered bands of clouds, and the sea reflected their grandeur in kind. A beautiful evening, and hopefully he would soon have some lovely company to share it with.

Divayth Levitated up to the spore caps crowning the tower and alighted on their wide, spongy brims. A few of them tilted against one another at the very apex of the tower, and she was buried somewhere among the crevices they formed, still out of sight from this angle. A subtle greenish glow spilled from the curve of a cap nearby, and he circled it to discover a rather breathtaking sight.

Torchbugs. Easily two dozen of them, floating in a spectacular cloud of fairy lights, tucked deep into a fungal recess. They lazily meandered about five small crystals glowing an unmistakable white-blue that seemed to have spilled onto the mushroom’s cap from the fallen hand of a sleeping Caliya Derynval. A few of the insects reposed on the scholar herself, sprawled out gracelessly on her side as she was, as though she had lost a battle with exhaustion only after a valiant fight. The woman was motionless save for the slow, rhythmic rise and fall of her upper shoulder. She looked positively serene in the buglight and that lavender dress, several paces inward from an arc of lines that denoted the edge of her protective ward. A fog of magic so thick it was visible roiled against the spell’s inner walls, diffusing the scene with a dreamy, sparkling softness.

A slow, wide smile stretched the wizard’s lips as he approached and peered through the glassy barrier.

“All the luxuries I’ve given you, and the allure of Tamriel still calls.”

*Let’s bring you somewhere more comfortable, my dear.*

Her ward was a powerful piece of magic, though. Disturbing it without waking her would make for quite the challenge. He touched its edge, tracing the currents and composition. The barrier was smooth and uniform, and it had an inorganic quality to it, reminiscent of her homeland. Divayth hadn’t had the chance to study her power down in the caverns, for obvious reasons. But here he took his time, examining her style and choice of linework, how it shaped and threaded the individual components of her spell. She was an artificer through and through, of that there could be no doubts. Her magic was crisp and clean, almost dwemer in its execution. Not the first time he’d noticed her comfort with precise spellwork.

But how to get in...

She had her own ways of parting small sections of the ward. It took him a bit of study to determine the manner in which she opened these gateways, but if there was anyone in Vvardenfell capable of reverse-engineering a hole into a place where there shouldn’t be one, it was Divayth Fyr. Within minutes he’d infiltrated a portion of the ritual, seized it for himself, and swept it aside.

A wave of the scholar’s uncast magic billowed forth as though pressurized, cool and sharp like the first mist of an early spring morning. Ms. Derynval herself immediately startled, scattering the touchbugs on her and rendering all of his efforts disappointingly moot. The wizard prepared to defend himself against his company’s grumpy irritation, but instead of a snapping demand for solitude, she shook herself awake, pushed up to her palms, and gathered her legs beneath her. Her eyes lifted to his with a clear and unambiguous relief.

“You found me,” she half-breathed with a little nod. “Good.”

Divayth raised an eyebrow, keeping his little sequence plaque surprise tucked behind his back as he stepped through the ward and into her cloud of magic. The aurbis fell away as he released her ritual and the hole snapped shut behind him like an alit’s jaw. It was a bit disconcerting, truth be told. His power warred with hers for dominance of the isolated space, and his soul felt a bit off-kilter, as though it had lost its sense of gravity.

“You’re difficult to miss, Ms. Derynval,” he replied. “Did you send for me?”



The scholar shook her head and fixed her hair, tucking a few short locks charmingly behind one ear. She raised the scattered gems into a small circle above her palm and produced a long, thin brass case to set them back into. Only then did he realize that they were star gears.

"More surprises from Sil, then?" he guessed, kneeling to settle in beside her. She still seemed to be chasing the sleep from her head, and hadn't noticed what he was carrying. He set the plaques down on his far side.

"Of course," Ms. Derynval sighed, looking down at the gears. Rather than closing the case, however, she set it by her knee, and nudged it away, allowing the crystals to continue to shine. "These bugs seem to like them."

"The pests will aggregate around any sufficient source of light," Divayth lectured distractedly, more interested in judging the scholar's state of mind. She seemed calm and welcoming, unusually so despite his inadvertent disturbance of her peace. He nodded at the gems. "What memories do these depict?"

She offered a small shrug. "I don't know, muthsera. I don't have the right tools to view them yet."

Her power was receding back into her soul, the wizard realized. Clearing the arcane haze. Accommodating an expansion of his own.

"Yet?" Divayth questioned. "Were they not included in Sil's care package?"

She actually smiled at that. Even managed a small laugh. "Nope," the scholar replied mirthfully, watching a torchbug land on the open edge of the case and wander its length curiously. "I'm not sure what he intends me to do, but frankly I don't really care right now." She looked up at the wizard beside her, and seemed a bit surprised by how close he was. "I've had enough of the past for a while," she managed anyway. "Building a mnemonic extractionary projector can wait."

Given the day's events, Divayth was inclined to agree.

"Was there something wrong with your bed then, that you've chosen to sleep up here?" he teased. "The night's breeze tends to be pleasant only if you can feel it, you know."

*That* produced a reaction. Ms. Derynval dropped her gaze and traced the spongy tissue beneath her with delicate glove tips. The soft, hospitable thing in her eyes tucked itself away behind a defensive glance more characteristic of the scholar he knew.

"I'm sure it is," she sighed. "Unfortunately, I can't really appreciate it." She tilted her head toward the spell's dome and the arc of lines he'd passed through to reach her. "I was trying to think of a dignified way to say this before I fell asleep, Lord Fyr, but I really didn't come up with much."

She paused, either for dramatic effect or just to gather her thoughts.

"Divayth," he corrected into the brief silence. He wasn't giving up on that, either.

Something that resembled a concessional laugh huffed from her chest, and she considered his instruction and nodded.

"Fine. Divayth, then."

Hopefully this time it would stick.

He watched her draw a breath, look him square in the eye, shore up her fortitude, and quietly announce, "I've been stuck up here since dusk, Divayth. I climbed up to watch the sunset, and now I can't get back down."

And she gestured hopelessly out at the exit to her little fungal cave, at the hollow of stars and clouds and the black outline of Vvardenfell proper.

"I've discovered that I'm afraid of the sky."

## Chapter End Notes

Yet ANOTHER one of those "This should only take a chapter or two" \*Five chapters later\* "END. PLEASE. SCENE. END."

But this day \*will\* end next chapter, I promise. This whole outdoor scene was supposed to take just one chapter, but it was already too long and I've learned that when I'm struggling with finishing something, just cut it short and get it posted. Besides, then everyone gets to sit in anticipation and I can tease you with the fact that this might end a bunch of different ways, and I'm not going to tell you which one I decided. ;) So for now, enjoy some Sleepy Caliya and some Divayth Trying Very Hard Not To Screw This One Up.

ANYWAY guess what, dear friends? I finally read The Truth in Sequence and lol, there's some good ammunition in there for Divayth to break down Cali's walls. I imagine that while, of course, he doesn't believe any of the Tribunal's manufactured tripe, he still gets his hands on all sorts of religious material and reads it just to know what's being fed to the unwashed masses \*these\* days. And he's willing to meet people where they are, if they prove themselves worthy of his interest.

Apologies once again that everything takes so much longer to get through than I'm expecting it to, but I hope you guys like this setup and the next chapter. Oh also I got a job, so updates might be a bit slow while I settle in. :D Once this scene is done, I think we'll be hitting the accelerator and jumping into the Caves within a chapter or two after that, and we'll finally get this plot into its climax!

# Logic and Emotion

## Chapter Summary

Battling sleep and a stubborn old wizard, Caliya tries her best to put logic to emotion and understand why Divayth Fyr keeps sitting so damn close and putting his hands all over her.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Caliya expected disbelief. Impatience. Ridicule, even, given what she knew of Divayth's personality.

*I've discovered that I'm afraid of the sky.*

What she didn't predict was acceptance.

"Ah. Missing the lofty brass arcs of Sil's birdcage, are you?" the wizard asked cheekily, brushing away one of the torchbugs as it scattered a green glow across his skin and silvery hair.

*...What?*

"How did you know that?" she practically blurted. "Is that normal, for Clockwork?"

As if anything was normal concerning her.

"Is it average for your type to suffer agoraphobia?" Divayth mused. He stroked his goatee with a thumb and forefinger. "I admit, I don't make a habit of ferrying people to and from the place often enough to study the psychological effects. Though I do recall a few books on the subject if you're interested. Perhaps I have copies in my library." He waved dismissively. "But quite frankly, the majority of Sil's devotees annoy me too much to care."

"Oh, and I don't?" the scholar asked before she could stop herself.

Her company chuckled quietly and crossed his ankles as though settling in for a comfortable chat. "Now now, you've had your moments of irritation. But don't worry, so does everyone. You've been worth your trouble, Ms. Derynval. Far more than most."

Caliya frowned tiredly, not quite believing him. "That would be a first. So you just guessed?"

It had taken her hours to come to that same conclusion, and here he'd done it in seconds. To her credit, she'd also been exhausted and battling an inexplicable terror the likes of which she'd never suffered before, but was that really an excuse?

They watched a torchbug meander its way down to her dress and intrepidly wander the fabric. Divayth met her gaze with a sly little smirk.

"Has my quick-witted deduction impressed, my dear?" he teased. "It was a bit more than a guess, given what I've learned of you and the life inflicted upon you by your clockwork oligarch."

His impish amusement was relentless. She didn't want to smile back, though. It didn't feel right. There was no reason for him to be so forgiving. This wasn't just some mistake, after all. It was an impediment to progress that required assistance.

*You're worth your trouble.*

No, she wasn't. Chronically problematic machines like here were expected to service themselves, not beg for repairs like factotums. Or Tarnished. Few problems in the Brass Fortress had upset her peers quite as sharply as the inconvenience of helping her.

The wizard harrumphed lightly when she didn't answer. "Ms. Derynval, recall how long I've lived," he began with a patronizing self-satisfaction. "I've visited more lands than the average mer even knows exist. Encountered many exotic beings. You're going to have to do better than that if you aim to catch Divayth Fyr off guard."

He nudged a torchbug with the back of his fingers until it landed and picked up her wrist to transfer it to her glove. It seemed content enough with this unexpected development, but he didn't let her go as he continued to speak.

"I've encountered Bosmer who live in trees so tall they think the ground is a myth."

Closer, he leaned. His tone softened. "I've watched scaleskins of the swamps panic in Khajiiti deserts."

Fingertips brushed her upper back. She ignored them in favor of staring down at the bright little insect underlighting the angles of his face. "A clockwork prisoner overwhelmed by her first days of liberty hardly phases me," the wizard murmured. "In fact, the only surprise I find regarding your new phobia is how long it took you to discover one. I expected significantly more problems than you've displayed thus far. Well done. Now come here."

Come here?

A sweep of power scooted her closer, closing the gap between them as he circled her shoulders with an arm. The scholar tensed and stared down at the row of star gears by her feet. This was getting out of hand again.

"Is there any particular reason you didn't send for help?" Divayth crooned softly, squeezing as she tried to lean away. "You've demonstrated partial projection and remote item retrieval. You could have found me and dropped off a note. Or sent word to that useless Egg-Face posted in the overlook. I'd have come for you hours ago."

"Useless Egg-Face?"

Who?

The wizard shook his head. "Nevermind her. I hope you didn't think me too upset from this morning to enact a rescue. Or was it pride that prevented you from reaching out?"

"No, no, it wasn't that," she replied, struggling to keep up conversation when he was so close. "I know when I'm cranked. I did try to reach out. But that was another problem."

*Another spring-spanner thrown in the gears.*

The aurbis was thick with his power again, familiar and comfortable. She nodded at the edge of her ward and the lines powering the spell. Divayth followed her attention.

"Tamriel is confusing," she admitted, prepared all over again for his ridicule. "I couldn't find you. I couldn't find anything." From the corner of her eye, she saw him return his gaze to her. She didn't meet it. "I'm not used to Nirn's magic. In Clockwork, everything is uniform. Simple. Straightforward."

"Simple?" Divayth interjected. "I've always found the place needlessly complex. An apt reflection of its creator, if I'm being honest. But everything *is* Sil there, magically speaking."

"And Sil is steady. Lord Seht," the scholar self-corrected, tugging weakly to free her wrist. It didn't work. "Here, nothing is steady. Nothing has patterns or meaning. There's so much diversity, so many currents ebbing and flowing, chaos and purposeless color."

Everything emitted power here. The tower, the people in it, the land and the sea and Red Mountain itself. Even these pretty little torchbugs around them all cast magic into the aurbis just as they cast light into the air. Caliya had tried to reach through it to find Divayth's shadow, but her focus kept breaking. It was like trying to walk a straight line while blindfolded in a wind turbine.

"That's why I put up a ward, after a while," she finished quietly. "It blocked out everything but me, so I could have a bit of quiet to collect myself."

"So you weren't attempting to conceal anything from me?" the wizard asked with a smirk she didn't quite understand.

"No," the scholar told him. She glanced down at the star gears and a small handful of bugs still investigating them. These were all she'd brought with her, and only then to contemplate Lord Seht's intentions until the sun went down.

"Good. You'd have done a poor job of it."

A chuckle accompanied his words. His grip on her shoulder readjusted. She didn't quite share his humor. He thought she was hiding something? Why? What would she want to keep from him? He was right, though — if she *did* have a secret worth keeping, she could do a lot better than a big

magic bubble on the roof. She'd learned plenty of tricks from the Father of Mysteries after all. Deliberately imparted or otherwise.

The scholar wouldn't need her ward anymore, though. Not with Divayth's power couching her soul. A breeze swept away the stale air as she Dispelled the barrier, and she drew up her knees and tugged down her dress to smooth it out.

A few more torchbugs landed around them, grounded by the wind. One found the toe of her company's outstretched boot. Another, her own elbow. The wizard's pull tightened once more. He was trying to draw her closer. Urging her to relax. She shook her head and resisted, closing a hand around his wrist to try to free her other arm.

"Let go, Divayth," she exhaled. "We should go inside."

He didn't need to keep up this strange attentiveness of his.

"Must we? So soon?" he challenged with a playful twinkle. A single woven spell caught both of her wrists and tinted the night magenta, replacing the green of the torchbugs and adding an intensity to his gaze that she really didn't appreciate. He drew her hands to his lap and covered them with his own. Heat seeped through her gloves from his warm fingers. "Stay here," Divayth urged. "You've been through much, Ms. Derynval. No need to rush yourself back down into the tower."

She shook her head again and tugged, wishing he didn't bother with these foolish games. "You don't have to console me, muthsera," she explained patiently, setting to work on unlocking his magic. He was going to put her back to sleep with all this gentle handling. "I'm not a child."

Undeterred as ever, his voice very suddenly dropped to a near whisper.

*"No, my dear. You are a woman. Allow me to treat you as such."*

He cupped her cheek and lifted her face. Her concentration slipped as she looked up into those crimson eyes, so depthless, transfixing, and so singularly focused on her. She watched him lean in and traced her lower lip with his thumb, fueling the quickest and roughest unraveling of a spell she'd ever performed. A burst of arcane will laced with divine resonance shattered his bonds, fading the red back to green as both hands captured his arm and pulled it from her skin.

"Muthsera, please. I said you don't have to do this. You don't have to treat me like *anything*."

She raked teeth across her lip where he'd touched her, mostly to chase away the lingering memory. The wizard closed his eyes in clear annoyance, but drew a breath rather than lashing out.

"Are you *ever* too tired to fight me?" he sighed. "Perhaps Sil installed a wind-up key in your spine when I wasn't looking?"

"I'm not fighting you," she argued. The scholar laid a hand against her chest and took a slow breath, mastering her wild heart. It raced like an over-revved engine against her palm. No one had ever tried these tactics on her before, and she was uncomfortable with their unexpected effectiveness. "I'm just saying that you're wasting your time. You don't have to charm me, Lord Fyr."

His eyes flashed in the emerald buglight. She met his stare with her own, determined to make him understand. "I'm not going anywhere."

"So you aren't ignorant of my intentions, then?" the wizard half-demanded. "I was beginning to think the Ever-Wound Meddler might have replaced your heart with a fob watch while he was at it."

"I know what you're trying to do," Caliya confirmed, deepening his suspicious fascination. "You're trying to entice me to keep working for you. I'm telling you, I don't need it. You don't have to convince me. You can spend your time on other things."

A brief silence followed her words.

"And where in Oblivion did you get that idea?" Divayth asked.

The scholar's stare flattened. "What *else* could you be out here and so worried about me for? I get it. I'm on the roof, stuck, you want to make sure I'm okay. I have a history of running away from things. You're trying to be gentle with me so I don't flee your expedition."

His arm hadn't quite left her shoulders, but he pulled it back to fold them both across his chest and frown at her. Caliya looked from him to the night sky beyond their little alcove and back, and

drew a breath that was closer to a yawn than she cared to admit.

"Why don't we just—"

"Is that the impression you've been under since we met?" the wizard interjected. "Has it even once occurred to you that my actions might be driven by desire, not obligation?"

The scholar took a second to process that, and everything it implied.

Her exhausted brain promptly snorted in amusement.

"Of course not. I'm not a smooth-gearred idiot," she replied with a laugh before she could stop herself. "Or *that* tired. If you're going to lie, it needs to be a little more convincing to fool Caliya Derynval."

She was actually quite proud of that chance to use his own language against him. Divayth, however, was visibly less impressed.

But only for a moment.

A slow, hungry smirk played with the corner of his lips.

"And what if it isn't a lie?" he asked in a low hush. He unlaced his arms to prey upon her once more, gathering her shoulders with one and tracing her cheek with the backs of his nails. "What if I find you utterly captivating, Ms. Derynval? A young, attractive dark elf, caught in a moment of vulnerable need. The master wizard who's come to rescue her."

Caliya sighed and interlaced her fingers with his, drawing his hand from her face. He allowed her to, but had more to say.

"You raise a fine point—my time is precious. If I did not want to be here, alone with you in the shadows of the night, I could have sent Aryon to investigate. Surely the conclusion must be obvious..."

He was wearing her down. Not logically, but physically. There wasn't anything he could really say to convince her that he enjoyed any of this. Divayth could whisper all the sweet nothings in the world; he could keep her out here until dawn repeating subtle variations of the same lines and she still wouldn't believe him. It was just too obvious that he was trying to get something from her.

She just wished he'd be honest about it.

But the sleepy scholar *was* beginning to succumb to his constant nearness and warm care. He clearly used this tactic to great effect on others, based on how confidently he kept chasing her. And frankly, she couldn't do much more to make him see her side of things.

At this point, if he kept insisting on playing his little games...maybe it was time to enjoy them.

"The obvious conclusion is that you should stop smoking whatever was in that pipe you tried to share with me the other night," she sighed, leaning her head on his shoulder. Besides, as far as games went, she'd played significantly less pleasant ones with significantly less pleasant company in the past. The scholar closed her eyes and drew a deep breath for a slow sigh.

"Finally giving in, are you?" Divayth murmured from somewhere above her. He slipped his captured hand free of hers. "We could share one tonight."

She smiled. "I'd rather not be coughing for the next twenty minutes."

"I would look after you," he promised in a whisper. "A touch of restoration goes a long way."

Soft fingertips of flesh and blood traced the curve of her neck. He toyed with the long shell of her ear, so very different from Lord Seht's precise brass. Her pulse quickened again. She struggled to suppress a tingling shiver, and closed her parted lips. He really didn't have to do any of this.

She wondered if he had any idea at all how it made her feel.

"No?" the wizard asked. "Perhaps another night, then, my dear. We'll have plenty, I promise. Just like this one." He chuckled again, still teasing her skin. "Plenty of time to acquaint you with the sky. Plenty of time to get to know one another properly..."

*Guarshit*, Caliya managed not to say out loud. She didn't have plenty of anything. Thought slipped like oil through a sieve, so distracted she was by his touch, but she knew that the minute she was done with that portal in the basement, he was kicking her right out the door.

"Don't fall asleep just yet. I have something more to share with you."

The scholar recognized the slither of metal on metal. The links and chains of Sequence Plaques. It was enough to pique her curiosity and crack her gaze.

“Still awake?” the wizard asked, drawing them into his lap.

“Yes,” she muttered, almost incoherent even to herself.

*Sermon 4* gleamed on the plate. She frowned and picked her head up. His palm wrapped her temple, guiding her back down. She offered no further protest.

“This morning, you seemed upset by my solution to your precious god’s puzzle,” Divayth began quietly. Fingers slipped through her hair, careful and soothing. She was beginning to like how short it had been cut. How...manageable it was. “An odd response, given your heritage and culture. Yes, Sil gave you your little code to play with, and a pet to assist in deciphering it. But I pay close attention to the beliefs and traditions of our people. Closer than many tend to realize.”

The night was warming again. Caliya stretched out her legs and tugged at her dress to smooth its hem. Divayth waited for her to return to his side and balanced the plaques between them, half on her knee and half on his own. His now-free hand found her forearm, then her wrist. He drew her hand back into his lap and held it in his own. The movement was so casually executed. So naturally performed. As if they’d been doing this a long, long time together.

“After all,” he continued, “I don’t author books for my own health. I hope to stem the ever-rising tides of ignorance through my writings. And to do so, I must understand the roots of that ignorance. Thus, I maintain a sense of the religious fashion trends the Tribunal expects its worshippers to adorn themselves with.”

The Plaques tilted up to face them.

“The Truth in Sequence,” Divayth explained. “You’ve read the collection, I assume?”

“Yes, but not in a while,” Caliya replied, her mind spinning up again now that he’d raised a topic worth considering. “Not always by choice.”

“And how much of it do you remember?”

What was he getting at?

“Are you testing my faith?” she asked. “I told you I’m not religious. Even if you think otherwise.”

“I am testing your memory, Caliya,” Divayth corrected, squeezing her hand in his. The wizard’s power shifted, brushing her soul with feathery shadow. A wide net threaded itself into existence before them and collapsed down, snaring a clear globe full of torchbugs. He guided the glassy lantern to illuminate the plaque, and tilted it toward her. “Read for me the first paragraph.”

“Too dark for your eyes?”

She meant it as a joke, but her tone might have been too tired to convey the idea. The wizard’s palm cupped her cheek, steadying her head as he pressed his to it. When he drew back, her stomach dropped through the roof and landed somewhere on the dining table of the overlook as she realized that he’d kissed her temple.

“Indulge me,” Divayth whispered into her forehead.

“By the word, I wind the gears,” she promptly began, not even needing the plaque for that part. Heat flushed her skin as she forced herself to focus on the glistening metal and not on the mer beside her. He set about working her left glove off, finger by finger. She set about pulling her insides back into place.

Memory quickly returned as her eyes traced the pressed letters.

“Now I speak to you of Sotha Sil’s silence. The children of ash sometimes ask, ‘Where is our Clockwork God? Why does only the Tourbillon speak His truth in mortal sequence?’” The discomfort of regurgitating such devotion helped collect her scattered mind. “‘They ask in hushed tones, with brows creased by fear. Do not flee from such questions, child of the Tribunal. These are the little blasphemies that lead to wisdom—the faultless flame that turns ignorance to steam.’” She could feel herself wincing. “‘For the Mainspring Ever-Wound is the Father of Curiosity, and curiosity is the joyful destroyer.’”

“The joyful destroyer,” Divayth echoed pointedly, as if to mark the sentiment for future discussion.

“‘Only in sundering can things be made whole’,” she continued when he didn’t. “‘Only the disassembled engine can be scrubbed and made clean. So, smash the old machines. Topple your

mind's idols. And from the wreckage, assemble new truths—flawless and water-tight’.”

The globe dissolved. The torchbugs scattered. Divayth smirked and set the plaques aside, then interlaced her now-bare fingers with his.

“Despite its repulsive zealotry, I’ve always found this particular series of lectures a succinct summation of the Clockwork Apostles,” the wizard explained. “Of course, its particular charm lies in its brevity, which is unusual for publications of the adoring. It was not my intention to upset you this morning when I ignored your solution in favor of more direct methods. I thought myself perfectly in line with the sort of logic I associate with your kind.”

Caliya listened quietly and considered his point. Was *this* his end goal? Was all of this setup and intimacy meant as an elaborate apology? What part of ‘she didn’t need this’ did he not understand?

“I guess I’d forgotten about that,” the scholar admitted.

Divayth continued to play with her hair. “Far be it from me to offer a spiritual admonishment, Ms. Derynval, don’t worry. That wasn’t my intended goal. And nor do I raise this topic merely to absolve myself of blame in our ideological disagreement. Rather, I wish to prepare you for what it means to work with me. By reminding you of the merits of force in a language I thought might resonate.”

“The merits of force,” she repeated, wanting to laugh but not quite able to muster the energy. “You always were considered a herald of destruction in the Fortress.”

“Hm. A moniker I don’t mind,” he considered brightly. “Unlike a certain Proctor Pullo...”

She was slipping off though, faster and faster now. Poor sleep, an industrially-fulfilling day, and an emotionally exhausting evening were closing their fists around the stick shifts of her mind, bidding her to shut down. She didn't want to fall asleep on her company's shoulder, but Divayth had no intention of letting her go back inside, it seemed. The wizard caressed her neck so gently, nails tracing her jaw in hypnotic, lazy rhythm. Her augments were so warm in his grip, threaded between his own, natural fingers. His power enveloped her, supporting her soul like a comfortable and inviting aurbic pillow. The last of her will was quick to drain away.

He spoke again, making some comment, or perhaps a joke about the Fortress. Or maybe it was about Lord Seht himself. Or his worshippers.

Darkness swallowed his words.

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Divayth quieted when Ms. Derynval's weight finally relaxed into his side. He listened for her breathing to slow and hoped she wouldn’t be too tired to remember this conversation tomorrow. Not that he would have minded another excuse to chat with her, of course. But he preferred not to repeat himself, where possible.

When he estimated that the night had taken her properly, the wizard pressed a Sleep spell through her skin, threading its magic deeply into her veins. She didn't stir to protest his invasion before it took hold, ensuring that she would not wake any time soon. Only then did he unlace his fingers from hers, and reach across himself to lift her chin and turn her peaceful face to his.

Divayth Fyr had pursued many interesting women throughout his lengthy life. And plenty of not-so-interesting ones, as well. He had suffered more than his fair share of rejections, for a variety of obviously inadequate reasons. But thinking that he, a master wizard and authority on all things arcane, mundane, and extraplanar, was under some obligation to charm her for her work was...an unusual attempt at justification, if not wholly unique.

"You really think you're more trouble than you're worth, hm?" he murmured, eyeing her limp form with a sanguine thirst. "Try holding an audience with Dratha." Although the scholar would have significantly less difficulty, for obvious reasons. "You know nothing of your own value, my dear, and I suspect that is by design."

But he had a feeling she would figure this out soon, removed from her intellectual aristocracy as she now was. A few weeks among what passed as average for Dunmeri society — or even



Telvanni society — would cure her of this egotistical shortcoming, particularly with her short temper and the below-average tolerance for wasted time she seemed to display. He traced her smooth cheek with his thumb and watched buglight dance across the curves of her dusky skin.

*Sil gave you to me, my dear. A gift, he claimed, or perhaps an apology for the inconvenience in my basement. Resist if you must, but I will have you.*

Divayth lifted the scholar's listless form from the mushroom beside him and drew her into his lap, circling her waist with an arm. He supported the back of her head with a steady palm and touched a tender, private kiss to that painted pair of lips that had been taunting him with their shape and nearness all evening. A warm satisfaction radiated through him as he finally claimed his lovely prize.

He looked down at her once more, drinking in everything she was.

*"Trust me, Ms. Derynval," he laughed quietly to her. "You are very much worth your trouble."*

The next few kisses were not quite so gentle.

## Chapter End Notes



Friendly reminder that Divayth is a Chad Asshole and Every Father's Worst Nightmare.

And thank you, AO3, for deleting this note after I finished writing it. 10/10 website would recommend.

ANYWAY (\*bangs table with hands again, Phoenix Wright-style\*) it's DONE. And I'm sorry it took so long. Truth be told I'm not even super-duper pleased with this chapter, but I just wanted to get it posted and MOVE ON. These two are impossible to deal with, and I've been arguing with them for weeks to try to get them to STOP arguing with each OTHER over any possible thing that one of them said wrong about the other. It's been a true challenge to find a way to prevent them both from spitting venom and spiralling into a sarcastic, unfiltered mess and ending up angry and pouting on opposite sides of the roof. They're both just unbelievably stubborn and opinionated, and getting them to work together is like getting two belligerent cats into the same pet carrier, I swear. One literally had to be tranquilized just to get things on the road.

But setting all that aside, I'm deeply amused by the fact that Caliya apparently just ignores around 80% of what's said to her when she's sleepy. It's a trait I didn't intend to give her when I envisioned this scene, I promise. But our girl's just Too Tired For This Shit, and Divayth totally rolls with it because hey, it seems to be working. He gets to finally play with his Clockwork Babe, and she gets to cerebrally deconstruct her own physical responses to him while it's happening. A win-win for everyone. :D

And yes, she's absolutely going to continue to be suspicious of him because tbh who really wants to hang out with an annoying, nerdy loser? There's only so much makeup and perfume that Gazes-Gently-Upon can slather over a dumpster fire, after all. Obviously, this suave, charming Telvanni dicklord wants something from her.

And she's very right, if you think about it.

He DOES want something from her. :)

Anyway, thanks for reading, and I hope it was worth the wait. :D

# Ambiguous Sentiment

## Chapter Summary

As Caliya settles into daily tower life, Aryon spends some time observing her. Later, she approaches him with a rather personal conundrum.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Well, Caliya took to Tel Fyr like a cliff racer to a fresh corpse. Eccentric as any trueblood Telvanni, her peculiarities only continued to unfold as days stretched into weeks and she settled into routine. That was about as long as it was taking Aryon to convince the enclave in Mournhold to gather another band of Undaunted misfits for Master Fyr to throw at his problems, and the spellwright distracted himself from his lengthy failures by observing their newest artificer at work.

One could call the woman industrious, if one was prone to understatement. Aryon had assumed that her first day reorganizing the shelving units was meant to impress, but, in retrospect, such diligence was a mere warm-up for the main performance. A true child of Azura and Sotha Sil, Caliya worked from dawn to dusk and oftentimes beyond, spending long hours in the Dwemer Hall, the sorting stations, the library, and occasionally venturing into Abanabi itself to recover remarkably fresh and mysteriously intact specimens (to Fyr's tacit consternation, whenever he noticed). She was a diligently organized coordinator and a capable instructor to those she considered worthy, and comfortably filled the leadership vacuum left by the wizard and his disinterest in performing the menial labor necessary for success. Her books, once added to the tower's library, became all but required reading for anyone seeking to help, and she fielded questions about them for hours while filling pages with endless notes for future texts. In fact, Aryon had been invited to a hush-hush betting pool over whether she or Fyr would publish their version of the expedition first, when it concluded.

The spellwright put 50 drakes on his master. But he wasn't nearly as certain as he acted, and most of the people who agreed with him didn't necessarily think that Fyr would write faster, either. They simply expected the energetic scholar to run out of steam.

As for the pair's personal relationship, well...it wasn't quite as clear-cut as the wizard's usual pursuits, and became the subject of much speculation among the more mundane men hoping for a chance of their own with Caliya. Of course, as chief of personnel, general tower overseer, and bearer of the brunt of Fyr's ire when his acquisition annoyed him, Aryon took an acute interest in observing them as well, both at work and at "play." Swinging pendulously between impatiently friendly and openly antagonistic, their rapport seemed to exist in a constant dynamic tension, an energetic push and pull that produced some truly spectacular sparks when they clashed.

For the better, they both seemed to inspire the other to improve. While not particularly competitive, Caliya set a high bar for those who worked with her, and that very much included Master Fyr. She expected the wizard to take an active role in his own tower's day-to-day by providing reports and demanding frequent feedback, and, to Aryon's wry amusement, he began to do just that. Between his hunger for knowledge and her interest in feeding it to him, it was only a matter of time before Fyr was up-to-speed and even outpacing the scholar in strategy and understanding. Within days they'd begun teaching both theory and application to the willing, with most preferring Fyr's lectures over Derynval's, but gravitating toward *her* practical exams.

She didn't seem jealous that he was a quick study, but she did seem to lack trust in those around her, and the tower's master was no exception. Of note was the way that Caliya constantly

double-checked all work handed to her, including Fyr's. Any numbers provided or conclusions drawn by the wizard or his underlings seemed cast in a suspicious light, and while at first Fyr dismissed her diligence as a needless expenditure of time, she did this so openly and consistently that others also began disregarding his assurance in order to seek her confirmation as final authority.

Aryon had had the pleasure of watching *that* particular clash unfold. Fyr, confronting her in the sorting halls about it one day, in full view of dozens of workers. He'd taken her by the arm and attempted to dislodge her from a table at which she was scribbling out her usual reams of notes, instantly drawing the attention of anyone nearby. Caliya was only to be disturbed gently if at all, and the intruder had better have a damned good reason to, unless he wanted a sharp-tongued (though somewhat ironic) earful about waste and efficiency.

Assuaging Divayth Fyr's ego was not a good reason to be disturbed.

Hushed muttering slowly rose in volume and venom, until the rest of the room was still and the wizard had turned her to face him and removed the quill from her hand. Though Aryon missed the first half of the fight, the second was filled with scathing confessions of a woman suspicious of any assistance, versus caustic commentary from a master wizard with thinning patience for her skepticism. To her credit, the scholar endured his verbal abuse with an unflappable composure, and recalled with bitter sincerity a long and enlightening history of academic sabotage as justification.

It seemed that Sotha Sil's little sanctuary was far from an intellectual paradise.

Only when Fyr began making headway into her reasons did his classic abrasiveness finally soften. The tension between them swung from professional to personal as he made her promise to trust him, and reminded her yet again of his evergreen refrain that Tamriel was not Clockwork, and her paranoia was unfounded. Aryon couldn't help a small, twisting jealousy as he watched the wizard advance on his cornered victim once their fight concluded, pinning her against the desk and gazing down with that leering smirk of his. She stood her ground as she always did and stared right back while he traced her cheek with careful nails and smoothed a palm across her shoulder. More than a few sympathetic glances were exchanged with the spellwright as most of the room resumed its work, and the pair was left to their reconciliation with only a few equally envious onlookers.

Aryon made a point of looking busy as well, but he kept a careful eye on what was *actually* transpiring. What the wizard was really doing, and the reactions -- or lack thereof -- they produced in Caliya. He was convinced that not all was as it seemed, mostly because the scholar never quite appeared to reciprocate Fyr's public advances. It wasn't that she rejected him, or even that she merely tolerated his interest. Something far subtler and more complicated than romance was unfolding between them. It was hidden in the way she fell silent at his touch, the way she tensed but did not shy away. The way her expression never changed, even when her skin flushed ash-scarlet against his fingers. The gentle manner in which she reclaimed her autonomy when she decided he'd had enough fun. The way she turned back to her work after he left and just sort of stared at it and breathed for long seconds, as though piecing together scattered thoughts or struggling to remember where she'd left off. There was some buried disquiet within her that surfaced exclusively when Fyr touched her, and the spellwright couldn't figure out if it was good or bad.

She wasn't the sort of woman who needed rescuing, after all. Caliya was very vocal about the things she disliked, and she did not offer the wizard special treatment in any other aspect of their encounters, which made her reluctant acceptance of his advances so very...ambiguous. No one else dared to make any overtures while Fyr had his eye on her, either, so Aryon had no baseline to compare her reactions against.

But it was making the Rethuls quite jealous.

This and many other observations went into a journal the spellwright kept whenever he had a free moment. He liked to track the interpersonal connections between the tower's denizens, to better untangle the Webspinner's threads of emotion and intrigue that drove this burgeoning corner of House Telvanni's politics. It would serve him well one day, and it was in this manner, in his private study a few days after the incident in the sorting halls, that a strangely tinny knock on the

threshold of his door raised his head from his writings.

“Good afternoon, Aryon,” Caliya greeted with a small bow, drawing her left arm behind her to join the right. She’d adopted plenty of the Telvanni’s prim-and-proud mannerisms since her arrival, and wore them as well as she wore Fyr’s flattering dresses. A rustic orange geometry on House brown seemed the order of the day, low-cut and floor-length, with a wide, detached bronze collar and matching gloves. “Do you have a moment to talk?”

Her figure was filling out nicely from that half-starved thing she’d once been, though Aryon was certain he wouldn’t have noticed without his master’s licentious side commentary whenever she passed. The spellwright returned the greeting and beckoned her in as he set down his quill, then tapped the ink to ensure it was dry before closing the cover. Yes, he always had a moment for her.

The scholar remained where she stood, and tilted her head concessionally. Something glittered in her hair. A decorative topaz barrette, or a pin of some sort. Enchanted. A gift from Fyr, perhaps? “It’s not about business, I’m afraid...”

No? Well, that only piqued his interest further. Her work and its successes were all the scholar ever talked about.

“A personal chat?” the spellwright asked with a smile. “Of course I have time. Have you eaten lunch?”

Her flat smirk vanished at the opportunity to combine two of the day’s tasks.

“I haven’t,” she replied expectantly.

He rose from his desk. “Perhaps you could join me.”

She backed away from the door and gestured to him to lead.

The invitation was a formality, really. The pair took frequent meals together these days, for a number of reasons. They both ate fairly quickly and preferred practical discussions when they were together, and it saved Caliya from a lengthy and indulgent encounter with a master wizard intent on absconding with her entire evening when she had a hundred other things to do.

On the way to the central teleporter, the scholar confessed that her topic was not only personal but private, and requested a secluded space in which to converse. They placed an order in the kitchen, and Aryon brought her to one of the many intimate little entertaining rooms Fyr was so fond of. This one in particular featured a radial window — a rare piece of functional architecture among the Telvanni — with a view that overlooked the bay and the main island beyond. Today was rather gray though, the landscape muted in a gloomy drizzle.

And yet, Caliya’s eyes brightened as soon as she noticed.

“Oh. I didn’t know it was raining,” she declared, crossing the room in a few strides to pop one of the triangular panes. She tugged off her glove as the wind seeped a moist chill into the room, and reached her fingers out into the mist.

Aryon lingered by the chairs a few paces off, mildly charmed as always by her strangeness. As busy as she constantly seemed to be, she still found little moments like these to enjoy in her own way, like a slight pause for a breath of fresh air.

“It’s been miserable the past three days,” he informed her with a smirk, turning her head. “Have you not been outside lately?”

“I’ll go back out when the basement is clear,” she replied, returning the smile. “Lord Fyr’s problems aren’t out there.”

Aryon flashed teeth, unable to stop a small chuckle. “Master Fyr’s problems lie everywhere, I’m afraid. I’m sure you could find plenty outside these walls if you tried. You wouldn’t even have to look particularly hard.”

Caliya snickered at that and withdrew her hand from the window. The spellwright watched her warmly as she admired her own rain-slickened skin in the glow of the nearby flora. He liked to think that he saw a softer side of her than most did, even accounting for his own lack of objectivity in the matter. She seemed to like him, seemed to enjoy these moments away from her work with him, and responded well to his playfulness in a way that she didn’t with other men. They’d spoken around the subject before, and she’d admitted that she enjoyed his concise professionalism, and wished that more of their colleagues behaved as practically as he did.

It was a start.

“Speaking of him,” the scholar began, looking up. “Lord Fyr is actually who I was hoping to discuss.”

“Oh? Is something wrong?” the spellwright guessed.

Her glove hung in the air where she left it. She peeled the film of moisture from her skin with the sweep of a glimmering hand, and brought both back with her as she closed the pane and crossed the room.

“Not exactly,” she replied, suspending the fluid marble between them as she wiggled her fingers back into the fabric. Water of all kinds seemed to fascinate her in a way Aryon couldn’t quite figure out. “I have a few questions about his behavior that I’ve...been meaning to ask.”

Ah. This wasn’t going to be pleasant, was it?

“His behavior with regards to you?”

Caliya looked up quickly, and shook her head. “No. Well...Not exactly. I know how he behaves around me. I was wondering how he acts around *others*,” she explained, picking the orb from the air and rolling it between her fingers as she leaned her elbows over one of the high-backed chairs between them. “You’ve mentioned that you like to study people...”

“...I do,” Aryon encouraged when she trailed off.

The scholar nodded in quiet acknowledgement. She watched him for a moment, then glanced down at her glassy little toy. It flexed like a grape when she squeezed it. Fine particulates swirled within.

The silence before her question simmered a quiet dread in the pit of his stomach, like the unsettled calm before a storm. He knew she was on the precipice of asking him something he didn’t want to answer, and he wasn’t looking forward to the disappointment.

*Yes, he likes you, Caliya. Yes, I think you’d enjoy reciprocating.*

He couldn’t bring himself to lie. Not in the face of such earnest trust. He wasn’t that heartless, not yet. Plus, if Fyr found out he’d discouraged a romantic prospect, the wizard might just remove a few key body parts that would discourage any of Aryon’s future romantic prospects, as well.

Finally, her eyes flickered back to his. “Does he often feel the need to physically encourage people to work for him?”

The question sank in slowly, like the brumal drain from a Frost Atronach.

Does he--

*What?*

“I beg your pardon?” Aryon asked with a blinking frown.

Caliya sighed and stretched the rain drop into a long, elastic rope and wove it impatiently between her fingers. “I’m sure you’ve seen it. Everyone has. He likes to stand too close, to try to charm me, like I need to be coaxed into work.” The water became a web in her hands, stringy and tangled. “It’s just that I’ve tried to tell him he doesn’t need to do this, that I’m happy to work for him, and he does it anyway. Is this just a normal thing for him?” She looked up again, an almost pleading desperation in her eyes. “With women, I mean. I’ve spotted him with Daynillo, too. And that other girl? The one from the Daedric--oh, nevermind.” She shook her head and tore at the gooey strands. Not one of them soaked into her gloves. “How do I promise him that I’m happy here?”

Her words lingered in the air, far longer than they had any right to.

Aryon struggled to craft an answer for such a bizarre sentiment. He wasn’t surprised by Caliya’s directness. In fact, it was one of the many things he appreciated about her. But was she really asking what he thought she was asking? Surely someone so brilliant couldn’t misinterpret intentions so thoroughly.

Maybe he was the one misunderstanding.

“You think he thinks you’re not happy here?”

“He must!” the scholar insisted. “I think he’s worried that I’m not getting along with people. That’s a normal thing to worry about, isn’t it? But I’ve told him that I’m just not the sort to make friends. It doesn’t affect my work ethic.”

Well, that was self-evident. *Nothing* affected Caliya's work ethic.

"And...you think he's making romantic overtures to..."

"To make me view him favorably," she finished with a nod.

Well, Aryon had to admit, he was. That was *exactly* what he was doing, in fact.

But apparently it...wasn't working?

Mercifully, lunch arrived, affording the baffled spellwright a chance to think while they settled down and dug in. Simple sandwiches were a common favorite for them both -- light, practical meals with quick preparation and minimal cleanup, and they could even be held in one hand to free the other for more work. Aryon processed the complaint lodged against Fyr while he ate, and Caliya was content to let things simmer as well.

"You think he's deceiving you?" the spellwright asked once he'd polished off half of the meal.

The scholar looked up from the plate she was wolfing down -- the quivering orb of rain collected crumbs like a jelly blob at its rim -- and frowned quietly as she swallowed.

"I hadn't considered that, actually," she realized. "Is that what he's doing?"

"It's certainly not what he's doing, but I'm more curious why you think this," Aryon replied.

"Well, I don't," the scholar told him. "Or, at least, I didn't, until now. But he is, though, isn't he? In a way. Trying to deceive me into working harder? But really, I can't work much harder than I already am, and that doesn't seem to be satisfying him."

*No, he would like you to be working less hard, Caliya.*

And paying more attention to him.

And probably satisfying him in other--

"Have you considered," the spellwright began before he could finish his own thought, "that he might be interested in you?"

The obvious had to be stated, if only to address the silt strider in the room.

Caliya's irritated exhale was immediately audible. She scowled flatly at Aryon with a strength of emotion he didn't expect.

"Don't you start, you're beginning to sound like him," she nearly growled. "That's the same lie he tried to feed me a couple weeks back." Her expression softened though, and she regarded the last few bites of her sandwich quietly. "Please, sera. I'm asking you this in confidence."

*And I'm answering sincerely.* Did...she really just dismiss the fact that Fyr was pursuing her, though? Was she serious?

"If you want him to stop, just tell him," Aryon offered, for lack of anything else to say. "I promise you, he'll be much more upset if you're leading him on than if you refuse him politely."

"Leading him on?" the scholar asked with the tone of a woman who'd never heard the phrase before.

"Pretending to enjoy his advances," he clarified.

"Oh. No, I do enjoy them..."

Only when it died did the spellwright realize that the glimmering thing in his chest had been a spark of hope.

"...You enjoy them but you want him to stop?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

Caliya sighed and raised a finger to pause him so she could take a bite and wash it down with a sip of tea. It appeared to put up a fight based on her brief sour expression.

"Because he doesn't have to," she finally managed.

"He doesn't have to pursue a woman who enjoys his advances?"

The scholar looked at him like *he* was the crazy one.

"He doesn't have to pursue *me*."

"So are you or are you not interested in him?" Aryon asked.

Something inside her snapped. She slapped a palm on the chair's arm with a muffled thump, and squeezed it angrily. "That's irrelevant! Seht's brass balls, why are you both impossible to talk to about this?! What I want has nothing to do with it!"

The spellwright lifted his own teacup. "Please stop shouting."

Caliya visibly deflated as he sipped, but she still looked as though she was suffering physical pain. He knew he was one of the rare few who could herd her away from the precipice of her anger, but he worried that her favor wouldn't last forever. She tucked a wrist under her elbow and pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger, a gesture that bore a striking resemblance to Fyr's impatient mannerisms.

"What you want has *everything* to do with it," Aryon replied after a moment. But the scholar just shook her head sadly and waved him off.

"No, it doesn't. Nevermind." She lifted the last bite of her sandwich but didn't eat it. "Excuse me for raising the point. I shouldn't have wasted your time with useless personal problems."

"Caliya, they aren't useless if--"

"Yes. They *are*."

Her words came with a finality that Aryon had learned to recognize as the end of any discussion. It was a bull-kagouti-headed unreasonability that sharply divided opinions about her, since anyone who tried to challenge her sparked a lightning-fast animosity that led to plenty of insults and occasionally a nasty grudge. Fyr triggered it all the damn time, but he seemed to be the only one capable of outlasting her bitterness and overriding her temper. Aryon himself had come dangerously close on occasion, but he knew when to back down, for better or for worse.

It stung quite a bit to watch his first chance at understanding the woman inside the automaton's shell slip away. But he couldn't chase it.

He could, however, distract her from it.

"...Well," he offered once he'd finished his meal, "I should have some welcome news for you in the next few days."

"And what is that?" Caliya asked. There was a lifelessness to her tone now, a joyless professionalism that only further upset the spellwright, but he pushed past it. She'd made up her stubborn mind, he wasn't going to pry her from her headstrong beliefs.

"The Undaunted wrote me back," he revealed. "Supposedly, they'll have an expedition ready by Morndas, to arrive later in the week. Dwemer specialists, most of them, if they're to be believed. So they'll have plenty of experience breaking down misbehaving machinery."

Her marble of rain rolled itself around the plate as the scholar listened, collecting remains as it went. The revelation perked her back up, at least a bit. She nodded and offered Aryon a cordial smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"That's very good news," she agreed. "I'll shift gears to finalize preparations then. That will give Lord Fyr and myself just enough time to finish my armor, and I'll ready fresh specimens for practice so our new arrivals aren't caught off-guard by their basic opponents."

"I trust you'll handle that just fine," Aryon replied.

*Armor?*

"Of course." As Caliya set her plate on a table between them to be collected later, the abandoned water flattened to an inert puddle. She rose and Aryon joined her, and the pair was halfway to the door when the spellwright felt a small touch on his arm.

Muted regret glimmered in the scholar's scarlet eyes.

"I'd like to apologize again for wasting your time," she said softly. "Please disregard my concerns about Lord Fyr. It was wrong of me to seek you out for personal troubles."

Oh, how he burned to correct her. A steel band closed around Aryon's chest as he squeezed the reply he wanted to offer between his teeth and pressed his lips against them. He *could* help, if she'd just fetching let him. The spellwright reached up to cover her hand with his but it was already gone, withdrawn into that prim Telvanni façade along with the rest of her personality and that glimpse of gentle uncertainty he so desperately wanted to meet.

"I don't mind, Caliya," he assured her, but the words were hardly off his tongue when he saw the storm clouds gather. Heat lightning flashed behind a narrowing gaze.

"You have better things to do than listen to my ungreased clattering," she informed him with a crisp darkness. "Thank you for sharing a meal. I'm sorry it wasn't more productive."



And she left. The spellwright lingered on the threshold, watching her stiff gait as she strode off and entered the teleporter alone. A thousand unanswered questions rattled around his skull in the heavy silence, each more frustrating than the last. Why did she think Master Fyr was being disingenuous with her? And why did the spectre of truth anger her so much, so quickly? Was she afraid to be cared for? Afraid to be hurt? Had something cruel happened to her heart in the Clockwork City? And why couldn't she even bring herself to discuss what seemed to the spellwright like a very serious problem? She was so quick to flee, like a twice-shy nix hound. And he knew so very little about her.

Aryon was left to wonder whether he should share this not-quite-revelation with his master. Would it even matter to Fyr? Or would it just embolden him to further bully the woman with cryptic tenderness and inconclusive affection?

If only she would just slow down, for five damned minutes.

But the argument could be made that slowing her down was exactly what Fyr was attempting to do.

The teleporter's glow swelled, disgorging an Argonian who hesitated when she saw that Aryon was still here. He stepped out of the way and gestured to her to enter the room to clean up, and started off toward the shining runes. He, too, had work to resume. And much, much more to write.

Caliya had left her home behind to come here, to a land of bizarre customs and strange people. But what had Fyr promised her, if not himself?

What was she gaining from all this work?

Or maybe, the spellwright considered, she was running from something. Throwing herself into a new enterprise to distract from an unpleasant past.

But then, what could possibly be so terrible in the sanctum of a living god? And how had she even ended up in Clockwork, to begin with?

## Chapter End Notes

Caliya: Why are you touching me?

Divayth: I like you.

Caliya: Guarshit, nobody likes me, stop lying.

Also Caliya: Aryon, why is Divayth touching me?

Aryon: He likes you.

Caliya, visibly angry: Guarshit, nobody likes me, stop lying!

Anyway, a bit of a bridge to the next section. I wanted to settle Caliya in a bit before jumping right ahead to the expedition, to show how her relationships with Divayth, Aryon, and the rest of the tower grow, as well as how her warped perception and the emotional damage she suffered in Clockwork twist her perceptions and control her more than she realizes they do. I could spend another ten thousand words on little snippets here and there but man, we're 34 chapters in and still not technically at the plot. ;) But we're getting there! Slowly but surely!

As always, thanks for reading. :)

# Opportunity and Resistance

## Chapter Summary

The Undaunted rabble have arrived! Divayth helps Caliya get ready for their introduction, and helps himself to a bit of intimacy with her while they're alone...

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Divayth's hands were wandering again. Caliya could feel him probing her sides, and it was taking real effort to stand still. Ostensibly, he was "struggling" to find the buckles and straps of her brass cuirass.

But he had no trouble locating the hem of her tunic.

*Introduce yourself in panoply, Ms. Derynval.* She regretted agreeing to his advice. *You're expected to lead. Not everyone will be as forgiving of a mediocre first impression as I was.*

The news had come as a surprise to her, too. Apparently he had better things to do during the expedition than chaperone a bunch of sellswords.

The scholar pulled his wrist from the plates when she felt fingers brush her skin. A quiet chuckle sounded behind her.

"Interrupt me again, and this will take the rest of the afternoon," he purred, shaking his arm free and reaching right back inside.

"Why do I have a feeling that's your goal?" she replied, scratching at her warm cheeks with a subtle spell of cooling. "You know who would be more helpful right now?"

"The twins."

"The twi--Yes."

"Those scaleskins can't do everything for you," Divayth countered, teasing at the fabric's edge once more. He was getting bolder and bolder each time, and more and more difficult to resist.

"They'd do better than you are."

"And they'd be half as entertaining. Even less." Again a warm hand found bare flesh instead of leather, and the wizard pried the cuirass apart to reach deeper. Caliya's nerves danced like the sparks of a belt grinder.

"You're going to keep the expedition waiting," she managed through a white-knuckle grip on her own collar.

"And?" Divayth asked, leaning her back against him. His whiskers tickled the tip of her ear.

"Those mainland lackwits have kept *me* waiting for weeks."

She fixed her eyes on a vein in the floor. "So you just want to waste *more* time."

"Caliya, I'd waste all day with you, if you'd allow it," the wizard growled, raking nails across her stomach. Gears slipped their rods and rattled down her spine. The scholar drove his arm back out with a stiff elbow and an empty glare. A pace and a half separated them decisively, and she flattened down her shirt and smoothed it beneath the half-assembled platemail. Scarlet heat flushed her face all the way to the tips of her ears. Her hands shook. He couldn't keep touching her like this.

Divayth was on her in a gasp, insatiable as he gave chase. Scrap clattered away from her stumbling retreat. Save for the two of them, the little side-workshop was empty and its only door locked, affording no refuge from his pursuit. He caught her at the wall, walking his fingertips deftly up the brass until the heels of his palms pressed her shoulders into the draping vines. The two halves closed snugly. The wizard surveyed his appetizing prize.

“Th-this isn’t necessary,” Caliya stuttered, hooking her fingers around his wrists and willing herself to calm. He was always more aggressive in private. “I told you I was seeing this through. I’m not running away--”

One hand traced her jaw up to her lips, where he laid a pair of quieting fingers. That same hand drew back her bangs, allowing him to touch a kiss to her temple. The scholar’s eyes closed as her heart tripped over its own pistons. His magic slipped through the brass between them to lace up her bindings.

*You could have done that at any moment, you insistent skeevaton.*

“Yes, you’ve made your resolve apparent,” he sighed somewhere above her. “There’s no need to refresh my memory.”

“Then stop acting like I need more convincing,” she replied, reassembling her determination. His Silence was becoming easy to unravel, at least. Especially with how frequently he kept imposing it on her.

Thousands of weary years sagged at the ancient wizard’s expression and hung from the downturned corners of his mouth before he blinked them away and shook his head.

“Are you ever going to give up this ridiculous sentiment?” he asked, stepping back.

She adjusted the fit of the bugleather base until it felt like a second skin, pretending that his concession wasn’t a massive relief. “I don’t understand why you won’t just admit the truth.”

His gaze flashed. “*I have.*”

“The only thing you *have* done is followed the wrong social schematics,” she corrected, crossing to the mannequin on which the last few pieces rested. Her pulse was slow to quell, and so was the heat it raced through her veins. The ghost of his touch lingered, troublingly pleasant. “The sooner you stop this foolishness, the sooner I can prove to you I never needed it.”

Her pauldrons were fashioned after the classic Apostle style, a pair of flared wireframes. Lighter and more complex than those found in the Fortress, she’d theorized improvements to the standard attire some years before, but had never been granted authority to craft a prototype. Divayth joined her to “assist” with these as well, and once they were clipped into their fasteners, his attention strayed elsewhere.

“How does it all feel?” he asked, teasing the nape of her neck with a sort of effervescent fizz.

“Heavy,” the scholar managed, struggling to focus as she stripped off her silk gloves and replaced them with plate gauntlets. There was a clumsiness to her fingers while he was toying with her like that. Diminished dexterity, as though her body itself was rebelling against meaningful work. Begging her to slow down. Yearning for this deceptive, wasteful frivolity. “I feel like I’ve lost muscle since I came here, doing nothing but deskwork and study.”

Her augments finally clicked into place after a bit of stubborn jiggling. The entire suit connected to her soul with a sweep of glowing light. Immediately, she felt larger. Stronger. More physically present.

And a bit like Divayth’s magic was simmering throughout her skeleton.

“Is this why you continued to slip into the caves?” the wizard asked flatly. “Light exercise?”

Words failed her. Caliya just forced a smirk in response and focused on activating the armor’s Feather spells. How he expected her to talk when he was gently electrifying her entire body, she didn’t know. But the weight promptly vanished, and only then did she pluck his arm away and break his spell. Aftershocks cascaded down her skin, cruel and sweet. He was getting better at this by the day, and it was a worrying trend. The scholar kept a grip on his hand to bring him to the mirror in the corner, though. He liked that sort of thing, and she wanted his help inspecting the pieces.

The pair studied her together, Caliya front and center in her new battle regalia and Divayth looming just over her right shoulder. For a brief and shining moment the wizard was all business, scrutinizing their joint creation with a critic’s approval. Brass plate gracefully wrought from scrap piling in the tower’s storage encased her chest, forearms, hands, and legs, trimmed with ebony accents and etched with a careful collaboration of red Daedric runes around purple Clockwork geometry. Black-and-bronze framework at her shoulders and hips offered the illusion of further

protection, though their true strength lay in warding magics hidden among the struts and slender crossbeams. Lord Seht's tools had served her well when blending Divayth's advice with experience from her own years in the Radius.

"We *will* make these Daedric, eventually," the wizard reminded her, tracing an ebony fin that ran the length of her forearm and flared from her elbow.

"No, we won't," she reminded him right back, watching his hand's reflection as it skipped right off the metal tip and caressed her upper sleeve. It was an echo of their design phase argument, with Divayth firmly on the side of attempting a rare fusion of Daedric magic into pseudo-Dwemer materials, and Caliya just as stubbornly distrusting the powers of Oblivion to do anything but betray her. Soul gems only, she'd insisted. No Daedric hearts, whatever gruesomeness *that* process entailed. Time and a lack of knowledgeable armorers had stymied the wizard's plans for now, and the scholar was happy to shelve the debate.

"Should have made a helmet," she decided, threading fingers through her exposed hair. Gazes-Gently-Upon had given her a refreshing trim the other day.

"For what purpose? A fashion statement?" Divayth asked. "I think not. Better to keep your senses unimpeded." A gathering twist of light dropped a bronze circlet into his palm. "I've seen you fight. You keep your distance well from mundane strikes. And as for magic..." He crowned her, settling the headpiece low on her brow and fixing her hair over it. "A bit of ensorcelled metal won't stop the kind powerful enough to kill a mage of your caliber." A fleur-de-lis of pearl and sapphire glittered in the organic light as a Fortify Intelligence enchantment slipped through her skull, far crisper than the little clip he combed away and half-tossed onto a nearby table.

The circlet lent her a regal air. She couldn't help but lift her chin. The culture of arrogance among the Telvanni and their retainers was difficult to resist imitating.

"Rely only on your abilities, Ms. Derynval," the wizard continued. "Never your equipment." As she exposed the curve of her neck, he traced it throat-to-spine with eight fingertips. His tenderness was almost physically painful to resist. "Any mage worth his salt is just as dangerous in sackcloth as in archmagister's robes."

He stepped back to summon his own platemail with spreading hands and a reddish swirl. She watched in silence, studying the way his power reached through the space between planes. The longer he played with her, the more he stripped her of speech, quelling her sharp tongue in a way her peers could only dream of. But now that he was done, her melancholic desire would soon give way to bitter frustration, as it always did. The best she could hope for was a distraction to ease the transition. Conjunction fascinated her, after all. Not only had it been forbidden in Clockwork -- as a school of magic, it was largely impossible to perform. No Daedric planes could be reached from anywhere under the Celestiodrome. Nothing could be sent or summoned through Lord Seht's omnipotent protection.

"Yes?" Divayth asked, noticing her interest as he adjusted a pauldron.

*Words.*

She nodded at his striking shell. "If armor doesn't matter, why bother with that?"

Bitterness curled itself around her chest, right on cue.

Divayth pulled his hair loose and drew it back into a fresh tail, glancing past her to the mirror beyond. "I find intimidation a useful tactic in dealing with the uninformed," he explained proudly. "It sorts the fools from the threats. An unusually ancient dunmer, comfortable in exotic plate? Even the magically insensitive respect such a sight." He smirked at his reflection, then shifted his attention to hers. "And if they don't, something else likely killed them before they've reached me. Or it will, soon after they leave." He extended a palm. "Come. You've a cohort of mercenaries to impress."

She didn't take his hand, but that didn't dissuade him from laying a clawed gauntlet against the small of her back as they crossed the room. At the very least, she couldn't feel his touch. The door unlocked as they approached. The central teleporter was close by.

"You know, I wish I'd had these back home," she commented, mostly to break the silence as she stepped into the azure glow. They would have made life so much more useful. No need to haul

specimens from floor to floor or up and down the cliffs...

"This *is* your home," Divayth reminded her. The casual tone of his correction didn't match the strength of its grip on her heart. He smirked. "Do try not to acclimate to them." The enchantment triggered, surrounding them with a drowning light that replaced the workshop's corridor with the bustle of the main hall. "I find such short-distance teleportation a tedious waste of time and power. Once this mess is sorted, they're being removed," he continued, stepping down into a room bristling with newcomers who fell silent at their arrival. Again he reached for the scholar to help her from the shallow steps of the platform.

"Removed?" she echoed, dropping her voice to a near hush in the sudden quiet. Pressured by their audience, Caliya *did* take his hand this time, and dusted off her most judgmental Apostle's scrutiny as they approached the crowd together. "And replaced by what?"

"Nothing." The wizard joined her inspection, sharp eyes flickering from face to face.

"Empty shafts." He chuckled knowingly. "Hoping for an audience with Divayth Fyr in his own home? You'll need to know your alteration."

While the scholar pondered what that meant, a dozen motley faces from Altmer to Redguard stared back at them, garbed in an eclectic assortment of armors and outfits, and carrying a variety of weapons and staves. Nothing seemed to unite the rabble save for a handful of emblems sewn, carved into, or slapped on some chest pieces here and there. In fact, their resemblance to the Tarnished was so jarring, Caliya didn't even realize she was scowling until Divayth cleared his throat and broke the silence.

"Aryon. Pick your jaw up from the floor. Introduce us."

*Aryon?*

The spellwright broke rank with the crowd to step forward, but his gaze never left Caliya.

"I beg your pardon, but when did you...?" He gestured at her outfit, an unexpected mixture of surprise and envy narrowing his eyes. "Where did that come from?"

Divayth's patience quickly waned. "It was a joint venture. Crafted when I could pry her from her work. Or her notes. Or *your* company."

Aryon usually took his master's snipes in stride, but something about this one seemed to bother him uncharacteristically. And yet Divayth seemed to anticipate his reaction. A beat of tension passed between them, but before the spellwright could even recover his composure, the wizard brushed him off and turned to address their guests himself.

"Nevermind, then. Since Aryon appears tongue-tied, allow me to introduce Ms. Caliya Derynval," he announced, gesturing to the scholar beside him. "Your tour guide for this extraplanar foray." With the same hand, he touched his own chest. "I trust no introduction is necessary for myself. If you haven't deduced my identity yet, I hope, for your allies' sake, that you weren't entrusted with a particularly sharp blade."

A burly, horned Argonian decorated in an abundance of feathers and beadwork off to the side of the cluster exhaled loudly enough to turn a few heads. Divayth had already been looking at him when directing that insult, but whether he meant it or had, like Caliya, only just now noticed the lizard's arm around Gazes-Gently-Upon, the scholar didn't know. Regardless, the wizard beckoned her over with a sharp index finger. When the Undaunted curled her protectively into his side, Divayth's eyes flashed.

"Keep my slaves from me and you will regret it," he threatened matter-of-factly. "You may have noticed these lands don't take kindly to the beastfolk."

A Bosmer hand shot out by reflex, crossing Gazes to stop his companion's advance before he'd even lifted a leg. This one wore well-fitted adventurer's leather with a large bow slung across his back, and though he was a full head and shoulders shorter than his companion, he still seemed to command respect.

"We talked about this, Jeer-Zish," he warned quietly. "Let her go."

All eyes were on them now, and the mounting attention seemed to break the Argonian's will. He released Gazes with a flat glare, and she grabbed at something behind him and hurried over.

Sees-Only-Beauty hissed incomprehensibly as she was yanked from her hiding spot. The pair

stumbled toward their master in a very uncomfortable silence. Without a word, he directed them to the teleporter, to be dealt with later.

As much as Caliya liked the two of them, they *did* bring a number of unfortunate circumstances down on themselves.

An encouraging touch to her arm suggested that it was her time to shine, whether she was ready to or not. The scholar stepped forward to fill the vacuum, and surveyed her team of warriors and spellcasters. Despite everything, she was grateful to Divayth for the circlet he'd given her, to supply the words she'd had no chance to prepare.

"Good afternoon," she began crisply, "and welcome to Tel Fyr. I understand that you're here with qualifications for this expedition -- prior experience fighting Dwemer automatons."

A few scattered nods encouraged her. Maybe they weren't as stupid as they looked.

"I hope it was made clear to you that many of the creatures you will be facing are unlike any you've ever encountered." As she spoke, she cast her awareness through the tower to the libraries, where excess of her illustrative posters had been stored. She plucked an exploded diagram of a verminous fabricant from the neat piles. Manipulating anything with gauntlets was a challenge, but she managed not to fumble, nor tear the sheet.

From the corner of her eye she caught Divayth motioning Aryon closer, and the spellwright circled behind her to join him. She ignored them both as she held her work out for all to see. The closest of the crowd leaned in immediately, and those further shuffled forward with deepening frowns.

"Our foes defy Tamriel's natural order. They are neither machine nor monster, but an evolution of both. Live specimens have been harvested for practice and study, and our staff will take you through an overview and training. They are fast, deadly, and violent. I hope you're prepared for a challenge."

Divayth chuckled behind her, drawing a few glances. She didn't turn, but she did hear his quiet comment, ostensibly to Aryon beside him.

"It's so refreshing to have competent assistance..."

## Chapter End Notes

Alright, so this had no business taking a month to write, and I apologize for that. The only excuse I can make is that I had to redo the second half of it after a lengthy battle with the prose, because the first version involved the two of them getting into yet another fight over her augments and Divayth seeing how close he could come to killing Caliya without actually doing that. Which, when read back, was just not...y'know. Not conducive to poor Cali falling harder and harder for Divayth while trying desperately not to. ;)

Anyway, I have a personal request for everyone who's stuck with me this long! Feel free to leave a comment with your favorite character trope or maybe even your OC, if you'd like to share? I want to fill out the Undaunted roster with some entertaining, interesting personalities here and there, and though I can't promise that anyone will get any particularly lengthy amount of screen time, our two Dark Elf Idiots are going to be stuck with them until around the end of the fic, so we might as well have some fun.

As always, thanks for reading and thanks especially for your patience. I hope everyone's been having a nice holiday season so far! And I wanted to celebrate our 2000th view since last chapter, but we're already just past 2200 (yikes!), so extra special thank you to everyone who drops by to check the fic out!



# The Pieces Come Together

## Chapter Summary

A jealous Aryon confesses his annoyance to Divayth, a grateful Caliya confesses her secret to Aryon, and a worried Aryon confesses that secret to Divayth as everyone gears up for the final act.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

At what point was Caliya going to collapse? Aryon would have sworn that she couldn't possibly fit more into her schedule, yet here she was, in handcrafted armor that reminded him of Barilzar's old vestments.

Maybe he *was* going to lose that bet.

"An uncanny resemblance to Ayem," Master Fyr commented with quiet pride beneath the scholar's address to their arrivals. When Aryon didn't respond, the wizard tilted his head and prompted, "Don't you think?"

"I struggle to picture Lady Almalexia in dwemer-inspired armor."

The spellwright didn't particularly care to indulge Fyr in his little moment of romantic satisfaction. His mind was elsewhere.

A sharp sidelong glance caught the corner of his eye, but he clasped his wrists behind his back and ignored it. Petty? Yes. But he was growing tired of investing so much into this joint venture with so little gain. Fyr's promises to him were ringing hollower and hollower by the day.

"Do you?" the wizard pressed. "A product of lackluster imagination, I assume. Or else, a failure to recollect our people's past..."

Insults certainly weren't helping. Not that this had ever stopped Fyr before. And, true to form, he droned on without any need for input or reaction.

"I understand that my younger years are ancient history to the modern mer. However, recall that Dumac and Nerevar were once very close friends..."

Aryon tuned the lecture out. The spellwright chose instead to watch Caliya handle the Undaunted, fielding questions with patience and fending off skepticism with silencing wit. He'd thought that Fyr had unleashed her upon them rather brusquely and with little preparation, but the longer she spoke, the more he realized that she was simply treating this fresh band of misfits exactly as she'd treated Tel Fyr's own personnel. Like she was made for teaching the ins and outs of exotic mechanics to people who wanted them gone. The scholar carried herself well in her new ensemble, and far more comfortably than most desk academics. Aryon itched to study the pieces and their curious engravings, and to speak with her about the processes she'd undertaken to create them.

Fyr's sharp exhale reached his ear. The spellwright glanced over on reflex alone, and made the mistake of eye contact with the wizard's pinched consternation.

"What bothers you now, Aryon? This little setback is finally out of your hands. Yet still you're dissatisfied." Fyr looked him up and down like a diseased alit. "I'll find better company if you're committed to such childish petulance."

That was about all the spellwright could handle for today.

"Then perhaps you should."

He turned to leave.

Aryon managed around four and a half steps toward the teleporters when a spiral of magic



around his trailing ankle coalesced into stiff chains. He scowled at them, but truthfully he was more nervous than upset as he raised his eyes and readjusted his posture. He expected to pay for his discourtesy, but...eventually. Not right now, nor in front of a crowd of onlookers.

Fyr followed his gaze to the dozens of stares now directed at them, and waved the others off. Caliya's helpfully crisp flick of the poster she was still wielding pulled at least some attention from the burgeoning disagreement, and the wizard quickly caught his captive.

"Complacent with me, already?" Fyr asked with a low hush and a frown. "Or perhaps your ambitions aren't as steep as you claim. How dare you dismiss me."

The spellwright swallowed his pride for the sake of self-preservation.

"I apologize, Master Fyr--"

"I am uninterested in your apology, Aryon. I am interested in your *answer*. What bothers you now? Did I interrupt your little meet-and-greet too soon?"

Of course Aryon didn't think he was in any serious danger. Fyr's fuse wasn't *that* short. But he wasn't about to dig himself a deeper hole.

"No," he admitted, opting for the truth. Nothing else was quite as safe. "I was simply surprised and disappointed to see that you'd spent your time co-crafting armor alongside your newest arrival, while assuring me that you were far too busy for practical lessons."

It sounded even worse to say aloud. Even more selfish and juvenile. He prepared for deserved humiliation as a flash of recognition in Fyr's eyes gave way to a wide smirk.

"Ah. Jealousy," the wizard taunted. "Thought of *Caliya*, regarding her monopoly on *my* time. Interesting. I admit, most men tend to be envious of the opposite." He folded his arms and chuckled. "You think you've earned a lesson from me, have you? All this hard work you've been putting in?"

Aryon's silence visibly annoyed Fyr, but they both knew the answer. The wizard turned his back to gesture at the scholar. She seemed to be engaged in rapt conversation with a particularly curious Altmer woman bearing a Psijic medallion, but no other trappings of the esteemed order.

"Her armor. Yours to study. Assuming it all returns still functional. You'll learn quite a bit. Once I've extracted the woman herself, of course," Fyr added with a laugh. "You've read her work on brass crafting, yes?"

"Cover to cover."

"Good." The wizard nodded approvingly, still watching the artificer and her audience.

"Then you'll have a solid foundation to understand what you'll be studying. And retracing her work will assist her, as well."

The spellwright frowned. "Assisting *her*?" he repeated. Hadn't the wizard just mentioned otherwise?

"I can't keep the woman forever." Fyr tucked a wrist under his elbow and smoothed down his goatee thoughtfully. "Much as I'd like to..."

Caliya glanced back at them just then, and seemed to seek their attention. Fyr gestured her closer and she dragged the crowd behind her to join them.

"They're asking to settle in," she informed both men, looking from one to the other. "Somewhere to store their gear so we can begin training and lectures."

All eyes turned expectantly to Master Fyr, but the wizard laid a hand on Aryon's shoulder. Daedric claws squeezed a little too sharply, but the spellwright didn't flinch.

"I believe that's your domain, then," Fyr announced. "I have preparations of my own to attend to." He nodded at Caliya next. "The expedition is left in your care, Ms. Derynval. Train them up right. Acclimate to your armor. The door unseals in one week."

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That week passed in a flurry of activity and chaos. A kaleidoscope of bold personalities did the burgeoning tower's political landscape few favors, but it did keep Aryon pleasantly productive, for once. Coordinating Tel Fyr to host guests raised his visibility among the workforce, and its

master's post-expedition promise fortified his patience. Once more he was seen as Fyr's right-hand, and not the frenetic and ineffectual scribe he'd slipped into while the Undaunted Enclave *and* the Tribunal Temple had been stonewalling his attempts to contact them for help.

Fyr quickly busied himself offering tips and advice -- mostly to the female members of the team -- as Caliya trained everyone, which kept his own spirits high and his unsolicited commentary low. The scholar, in response, seemed relieved by his distraction. In fact, with the wizard's interests split among so many potential romantic candidates, she was finally able to step back and observe his shallow courtship attempts. She sought Aryon out to discuss her findings, as well as her worries and opinions about individual members of the expedition. In addition to Jeer-Zish's concerning vocal opinions on Telvanni slave practices, she also struggled to contend with, among plenty of others, Nathdil Relth, a mainland Dunmer growing more rueful by the day as he listened to Midar recall sad tales of his dead brother, and Andraestia, the Psijic Altmer she was getting along with well enough but who seemed to be answering to -- or arguing with -- a higher authority in her own head. Their variety of weapons concerned her as well, as she struggled to find a place for the archers and dagger-throwers of the bunch. The spellwright offered advice and she took it well, and seemed to enjoy spending more time around him in these final few days.

The morning of the expedition, however, saw a stark change in her demeanor. Dressed once more in her armor and with that strange clockwork dovah fly of hers perched behind her left ear, she sought him out for a private audience not long after breakfast. Gone was her cordial professionalism, and in its place a grave sobriety.

He took her to a small study to talk. Windowless and sparsely furnished with a table, a desk, and some chairs, it was meant for undistracted focus, not for lounging. On the way, Caliya apologized once more that her matter was a personal one. A familiar refrain at this point, despite his insistence that he didn't mind -- welcomed, even -- non-professional topics. He still knew so little about her, despite their relative closeness.

She closed the door behind them and paused strangely, offering the handle a mechanical stare. The patient spellwright waited for her to collect her thoughts and turn. He was certainly in no rush, today.

When she did, Aryon offered a seat.

She refused, albeit gently.

Hopefully, she promised, this wouldn't take long.

"We'll be leaving soon." Her gaze was unreadable. "I feel that you deserve this."

*Deserve this?* The vague promise intrigued him, but it was the actions that followed which left him truly speechless.

They happened fast. A brisk few steps, and she was in his arms, her chest against his. The ghost of her charcoal kiss tingled his cheek, clumsy but well-meant. Still in her brass and ebony, her body was about as sharp and hard-shelled as her personality, but her embrace was careful and confident, and rather more charming for it.

Aryon fixed the door behind her with a steady frown, tracing a hundred paths in his mind to understand what she was doing and why. By all means, her affection was far from unwelcome, but not once before had she offered any hints of a deeper interest. Why now, on the morning of her expedition? Why him, and not Fyr? Had something been slipped into her drink? Her meal? Something meant to soften her toward the wizard, something redirected to the wrong target? Was this some sort of trick she'd picked up? Some manipulation she was attempting, after studying Divayth for so long?

"There is a very strong probability that I won't be returning from this sojourn into Clockwork."

Her voice was quiet in his ear. She didn't let him go.

Her words provided a motive, however.

Well, one of several.

She was trying to say goodbye.

Or, perhaps, she was scared.

"Any unknown journey carries with it some amount of risk," he replied, seeking to reassure as

he held her. “Master Fyr will protect you. And *you’re* quite capable, of course. Not to mention your powerful companions...”

There was no need to fret.

But she shook her head and drew back, just enough to meet his gaze.

Her face was so close to his. Unflinchingly so. And there wasn’t a trace of fear in those steady, crimson eyes.

“It isn’t the danger,” she promised quietly, finally taking a step back. Her armor wasn’t warm, but a chill still filled the air where she’d been. “This expedition is destined to succeed, in one way or another.” Her gaze wandered his face, no doubt reading his deepening interest. “You’ve been good to me, Aryon. Better than most, and kinder than I deserve. I just wanted to show my gratitude. But I’d like to trust you with a secret before we go, if you can keep it from Master Fyr until then. He knows it already, but he may have forgotten, and it’s very important that he not remember until after we’re underway.”

A secret, hm?

“Of course,” the spellwright replied with a nod.

A good secret could be worth its subject’s weight in gold, after all.

However, as soon as she told him precisely *why* she thought she wasn’t returning from Sotha Sil’s legendary domain -- and it took her quite some time to do so, given the sheer amount of explanation her reasoning needed -- he realized that under no circumstances could he keep this information to himself.

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Divayth surveyed his expedition. Ms. Derynval had whipped them all into satisfactory shape, given the tight time frame. She was resplendent in polished brass yet only dimly aware of this fact, and paced the crowd restlessly as she looked from soldier to soldier and back. An unrivalled eye for detail scrutinized each shoddy flaw, each fraying sleeve and speck of rust. Appearance aside, she’d come to terms with their might but still worried for their safety, a trait which surprised the wizard. He would have expected a semi-social fatalist like her to trust in Sil’s grand plan.

The very idea threatened to upset his constitution.

“You’ve readied them?” he asked, breaking the silence. His words brought her to a prompt halt. She met his gaze and nodded.

“Yes, muthsera.”

*Muthsera.*

She was eager to leave. Restless as always to finish her work.

He frowned at the address to remind her of his distaste. She inclined her head. A suitable enough apology, for now. Her most deferential habits were hardest to break, he’d noticed.

A product of her childhood.

“Very good. I’ll unseal the ward.” He waved in its general direction. “Clear a path through the meddlesome machines and meet me at the rift.”

The general rustling stopped as everyone turned. Caliya said what he could practically hear them all thinking.

“You’re not joining us?”

“I will be,” he corrected, striding past her, “once I’ve made my usual transliminal preparations.” He stopped at the door and raised a clawed gauntlet to unweave the power separating his tower from the hordes of fabricated death awaiting the weak. Nearly as soon as the magic peeled away, a clattering thud sounded against the wood and slithered off its metal bracings.

“Hop to it,” Divayth urged, turning his back as another, more brutal strike flinched the door in its frame. Everyone who wasn’t a part of the expedition shuffled or staggered backwards in clumsy haste. The wizard smirked. “Unless you prefer your battles with bystanders.”

And a swirl of power Recalled him to his study. He trusted Ms. Derynval to finish the task he’d set her to. She hadn’t failed him yet, after all.

Much of the morning had been spent laying out what he'd need to study this anomaly. Tools to be calibrated, artifacts to capture and measure energy levels, anatomically stabilizing hyperagonal potentates to be imbibed. He'd leave the disorientation and vomiting to those who deserved to experience them at least once.

Divayth expected the onslaught to take at least a few minutes, which would have been plenty of time to finish his necessary work if a prominent knock didn't rattle his door and pull him out of a sensitive origination attunement.

Aryon.

"Yes?" he called over his shoulder, irate. Everyone in the tower knew better than to disturb his focus.

The door opened to reveal the spellwright, stiff-spined but already second-guessing his decisions. Divayth set down his Dwemeri harmonic capacitor and glowered at the mer over its fading light and slowing blades. If he was going to be a disturbance, the least he could do was be a confident one.

"This must be important," the wizard decided. "I'm busy. You're distracting me. What is it?"

"It's Caliya," came the immediate reply. Without invitation Aryon started across the room, closing the door behind him.

Divayth's eyes narrowed. "Worried for her safety?" he guessed. "Touching. I understand the woman means something to you, but she will be fine. Unless, of course, you continue to interrupt my preparation."

Despite the finality in his master's tone, the spellwright held his ground. Bold action *had* gotten him far in the past.

"It is her safety, yes, but I promise you my concerns aren't baseless, Master Fyr. I've important information to warn you about. Information she specifically asked me to keep from you." Aryon revealed.

Divayth folded his arms expectantly, trusting the urgent sincerity he was listening to.

"Well, go on."

"You are aware of the brass artifacts replacing parts of her hand, yes?" the spellwright asked. "She tells me you know of them."

"And I do."

The fact that Aryon knew, however, gave further pause to his impatience. The scholar took great pains to hide them from most under those gloves she always wore.

"And you're aware that they're capable of killing her?" his student pressed.

Now *that* was worth considering.

"Yes...?"

Aryon seemed to have expected a more enthusiastic answer than that, or perhaps something less brief. But Divayth was more interested in his purpose here than more time-wasting speculation. He waited for the mer to make something resembling a point.

And when it came, it did so succinctly.

"She is under the impression that Lord Sotha Sil gave her those artifacts for that explicit purpose," Aryon revealed, fixing his superior with a pointed stare. "She expects to die on this expedition, and she is unsettlingly prepared to do so."

Divayth could feel the incredulous disbelief weigh down his expression, and he made no effort to hide his exhaustion.

"This again?" he sighed, turning away with a sigh and a slow nod. "And here I thought she was done martyring herself for that half-mechanical s'wit. One would suppose I've given her more than enough to live for. Well, very good. For once, an appropriate interruption. Was there anything else?"

"No, sera."

The wizard waved him off. "Then leave me to my work. That news has just about doubled it. Unless you'd care to assist."

He glanced back for an answer, expecting a no. But Aryon spread his arms in open invitation,

then drew them behind his back to await commands.

Divayth regarded him with quiet approval. Competent help *was* rare. Best not to refuse the offer.

## Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, ONE MORE chapter before everything begins?? It's already been a long road to get here! But I promise this is the final one. It's been a while since the scene on the balcony in the master's overlook where we learned about the dangers of Seht's Keys, and I wanted Caliya to have one moment of tenderness with Aryon, in her I'm-Really-Not-Good-At-This way.

Thank you for being patient with me. And than you also to everyone who sent me OC and character ideas! You've spotted a few of them already in this chapter, and more will make their debut as the trial progresses. :) Feel free to keep sending me other OCs or archetypes if you'd like; I'll be more than happy to work them into the Undaunted as flavor characters here and there.

All that being said, I have to offer an apology. This might be the last time I post for a while. I know we're on the cusp of the final act, but I've been at this since...what, April? Almost a year straight, and it's sponging the creativity out of me. I need a break from this particular story, and I hope you'll understand. When I do come back to it, I plan to write a few more chapters privately before posting any of them, so I can give you a few updates in relatively quick succession. :) And if anyone wants to reach out to talk about their OCs or the fic or anything, feel free to send me a friend request on Discord at Savnarae#0363.

(There's also a chance I might start a \*different\* Divayth fic in the meantime as well. I've had another idea rattling around in my brain for a while that I want to write down, so keep an eye on the tags if I get around to it. If I do, I hope you'll join me on that journey as well. It'll involve a lot less awkward romantic fumbling and a lot more Daedric ass-kicking, I promise.)

As always, thanks for reading! And thank you for being patient with me. :)

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